Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv
18
Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles
Beast of the Land

"WELCOME BACK, SIR AMAKAWA."
Aria appeared in the living room past the entryway and bowed courteously. Being the beautiful girl that she was, Aria looked good wearing anything, but the impression she gave in an apron was completely different from her attendant uniform.

Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles

Tears welled in Liselotte's eyes, but she held them back. The feelings that swirled in her chest had nowhere to go and threatened to burst.
"SOMEONE... SAVE ME..."

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Rio (Haruto Amakawa)

The main character of this story; he lives to avenge his mother's murder. Currently traveling as "Haruto" due to his arrest warrant issued in the Beltrum Kingdom. In his previous life, he was a Japanese university student named Amakawa Haruto.

Aishia

Rio's contract spirit who calls him Haruto. A rare humanoid spirit with missing memories.

Celia Claire

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. A genius sorcerer and Rio's former academy teacher.

Latifa

A werefox girl from the spirit folk village. In her previous life, she was an elementary school student named Endo Suzune.

Sara

A silver werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Alma

An elder dwarf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Orphia

A high elf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Ayase Miharu

A high school student from another world. Haruto's childhood friend and first love.

Sendo Aki

A middle school student from another world. Feels resentment towards her half-brother Haruto.

Sendo Masato

An elementary school student from another world. Currently under the protection of Rio, along with Miharu and Aki.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Finally reunited with her older sister, Christina.

Christina Beltrum
First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Protected by Rio, together with Flora.

Sendo Takahisa
Aki and Masato's brother from their original world. Currently the hero of the Centostella Kingdom.

Sakata Hiroaki
A hero from another world. Operates with the support of Duke Huguenot.

Shigekura Rui
A high school student from another world. The hero of the Beltrum Kingdom.

Kikuchi Renji
One of the heroes from another world. An adventurer unaffiliated with any kingdom, until...

Liselotte Cretia
Noblewoman from the Galarc Kingdom and president of the Ricca Guild. She was a high school student named Minamoto Rikka in her past life.

Aria Governess
Liselotte's head attendant and an enchanted sword wielder. Has been friends with Celia since their academy days.

Sumeragi Satsuki
Miharu's friend from their original world. Currently the hero of the Galarc Kingdom.

Charlotte Galarc
Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. Shows strong affection towards Haruto.

Reiss
A mysterious man pulling the strings behind the scenes. Wary of Rio for always disrupting his plans.

Sakuraba Erika
The woman who caused a revolution in a minor nation. Is hiding her identity as a hero.

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Prologue

At the Galarc Castle, just before the main entrance...

“Please allow me to accompany you on the mission to rescue Lady Liselotte.”

Aria Governess, Liselotte’s head attendant, bowed her head before Rio with deep regret. There was no need to question her motive: Liselotte was her master.

She had an extraordinary amount of loyalty to her—she treasured Liselotte beyond mere loyalty. Seeing how she was dressed in adventurer-like clothes, she must have prepared for this journey in advance. She may have even approached King Francois for permission to leave by herself if Rio hadn’t acted as he did.

It was easy to see the loyalty behind the determination in Aria’s expression. If Rio were to refuse her here, she would simply act independently from him. That would result in her following Rio anyway, as he was capable of tracking Erica from afar.

Ability-wise, there was no concern of Aria becoming a hindrance. She was a reassuring force to have if the situation called for more people. Furthermore, the situation had caused Rio to begin pursuing Saint Erica without hearing the details of what happened. Since he lacked information, having Aria come along would be most beneficial.

The only reason Rio had to refuse her was Aishia. Until now, he had kept her existence as a spirit as secret as possible from any third parties. Since he was using her to track Erica right now, he’d have to reveal her to Aria. However, he didn’t mind. After closing his eyes and thinking for a moment, he prioritized the feelings he could sense coming from Aria and nodded.

“I understand... However, I will require that you follow my orders while we pursue her. Is that all right?”

“Of course. Thank you very much,” Aria said immediately with a low bow.

Haruto, the target sped up dramatically after leaving the gate. She’s

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heading out of the noble district to avoid attention, said Aishia's telepathic message.

Got it. Continue trailing her in spirit form.

Understood.

Their conversation wrapped up quickly.

"Let's go. It seems the saint has sped up," Rio said to Aria, looking in the direction of the front gate several hundred meters away.

"...Right." Aria nodded with a slightly surprised look; it was impossible to see outside the grounds from their current position. Rio had claimed to have a method of tracking the saint without being noticed, so she was probably wondering how he knew that.

"I'll explain the details later. Please enhance yourself with your enchanted sword," Rio ordered, enhancing his own body at the same time.

"Right." Aria held back her questions for the moment and grabbed the hilt of her sword, focusing on the task at hand.

"Follow me."

Rio ran towards the front gate. With Aria at his heels, the two left the Galarc Castle grounds.

Chapter 1: The Pursuit Begins

Ten minutes later, Rio and Aria were outside of the capital, about three kilometers northwest of the city. They waited beside a boulder located past the grain-producing fields outside of the city walls, but before the forest that spread beyond it.

“She’s met up with someone in the forest—a man in his twenties. He seems to be her bodyguard,” Rio said to Aria, staring into the forest.

“I see...” Aria stared off in the same direction as Rio, her reply tinged with faint confusion.

I can’t see anything with the naked eye, so how did he...?

Their current position made it impossible for them to see Erica—their view was blocked by trees, and they had no way of knowing where in the forest she was located. There was no way of seeing anything past ten meters away, and they hadn’t even spotted Erica once during their pursuit.

Despite that, Rio continuously provided information as though he could see Erica inside the forest. Aria didn’t doubt his tracking abilities, but her confusion was understandable.

However, it was possible that Liselotte was located within this forest. Depending on the situation, they may even end up launching an ambush attack. With that possibility in mind, Aria refocused herself.

“There are two trained griffins beside them. Unfortunately, Liselotte isn’t here.”

“Is that so...”

It seemed that Erica wasn’t keeping Liselotte near herself.

“If they’re going to travel by griffins from here, Liselotte was probably transported somewhere else...”

Erica had made a beeline for this forest. It was unlikely for Liselotte to be anywhere nearby.

Then, sure enough, Rio’s bad feeling was right on the mark.

“It seems like they’re getting on the griffins and taking off.”

“Following them on foot will be difficult...”

It would be possible to run along if they enhanced their bodies with their enchanted swords, but their speed would fall in areas with varying elevation, and they would have to run while expending magic essence for extended periods of time.

Pursuing in an open area would create the risk of the other party noticing them, so they were greatly disadvantaged by being on the chasing side. Because of this, Aria had a grim look on her face, but...

“Then we’ll just follow them from the skies,” Rio said casually, as though that wasn’t an issue.

“I’ve heard that your enchanted sword can grant the ability to fly, but...”

All Aria knew was that Haruto Amakawa’s enchanted sword had the ability to control wind, which he could use to fly through the air. She had no idea of the specifics—how long he could maintain flight, how freely he could move about, and so on. She didn’t know the details of the ability, and she had never witnessed him fly in person.

“The saint is exiting the forest.” As soon as Rio spoke, two griffins appeared from deep within the forest. Two figures resembling Erica and her bodyguard were riding them as they rose into the sky.

“They’re flying northwest.” Aria could also see Erica on the griffin. With a fierce glare, she voiced the direction of their movement out loud.

“They’ve just left the capital, so they’re probably being wary of pursuers. Her eyesight will be raised dramatically through her Divine Arms, so we’ll follow while keeping our distance. Please inform me immediately if you sense anything strange,” Rio directed with a serious look.

“Right.”

“And so, I’d like to begin following them by air, but...”

When it came time for them to depart, Rio looked at Aria with an air of awkwardness.

“...What?”

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Some time later, in the skies above the outskirts of the capital...

“I’m sorry... I’ve become a complete hindrance,” Aria apologized weakly from Rio’s arms.

Since she didn’t possess a method of traveling through the air, Rio had to

carry her in his arms as he flew. However, Rio and Aria weren't quite friends. They were more than acquaintances, having sparred together at the training event hosted at the Galarc Castle, but they were nothing more than an instructor and an attendee at that event.

Celia and Aria had a personal friendship, but Rio just considered Aria to be Liselotte's attendant, and Aria merely saw Rio as an important friend of her master's. The two maintained a proper sense of distance from each other.

"No, I'm sorry as well..."

The two were pressed together, flying through the sky, making for a rather awkward situation. Neither of them had particularly talkative personalities, which made them feel even more conscious of each other.

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“Why do you apologize, Sir Amakawa?”

“I believe it’s inappropriate for an unmarried woman to be in such close contact with the opposite sex.”

“You are aware I am not a noble, right...?” Aria blinked, showing a smile of faint amusement. It was the moment her expression, which had been strained with confusion until now, softened. That was enough to leave an impression on Rio.

“I don’t think being a noble is relevant...” Rio said with a frown.

“I’m saying such consideration is unnecessary, as I am not a noblewoman. If anything, it’s much more inappropriate for you, Sir Amakawa. You’re an unmarried nobleman carrying a woman you’re not engaged to.”

“That’s even less relevant to being a noble.”

“But there’s no denying that someone of your position should avoid getting involved with bad women. I fear my company will cause those around you to feel apprehension. I was so blinded by the saint, I completely failed to consider that when I asked to accompany you. Please accept my apologies,” Aria said regretfully.

“I don’t believe you’re a bad woman, so that assumption is incorrect to begin with. It’s very reassuring to have you here, so please don’t apologize,” Rio said gently, showing consideration for Aria’s feelings.

“Thank you... But why are you willing to go this far?”

Rio cocked his head in confusion. “What do you mean by ‘this far’?”

“As soon as the saint left the room, you acted on Lady Liselotte’s behalf before anyone else. You had only just returned to the castle, and were still lacking an understanding of the situation. Yet in spite of that...” Aria hesitated over her words apologetically, but Rio interrupted her bluntly.

“Liselotte had been kidnapped. That was all I needed to know of the situation. She’s an important friend to me, and to those around me.”

“...” His words were so confident, Aria blinked in surprise.

“If she’s in trouble, there should be something I can do about it. That’s why I just did what I could,” Rio explained.

“Thank you very much... For acting to aid my master.”

“It’s nothing to thank me for. You want to save Liselotte because you feel a stronger connection to her than just a regular master-servant relationship too, don’t you?”

“Yes...”

“Then your reason for acting is the same as mine. Let’s combine our strengths to rescue Liselotte.”

“Thank— No. Let’s rescue her.”

Aria was about to thank him again, but instead nodded resolutely.

“And so, could you tell me about the saint while we move? I only know that she’s a hero that kidnapped Liselotte right now.”

“The exact date and time are unknown, but it probably happened around the same time you and the others departed from the castle. The citizens of a minor nation to the northwest of Galarc revolted against the royal family. Leading the revolution was that woman, who created the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica in its place.”

“She led the revolution over a kingdom, huh... She mentioned the abolition of the monarchy to His Majesty too.”

Rio took in a light breath. It was clear that the saint was a dangerous person from their violent interaction in the castle, but her danger had risen to the level of overthrowing an entire nation.

“She claims to be bringing salvation to the people—to the weak. That’s why she wants the monarchy to be abolished and the country handed to its people. I believe she used the same justification when leading the revolution.”

“Considering the uproar she’s caused, she seems to have quite the initiative. No average person would ever consider leading a revolution to overthrow an existing government...”

Why would a woman who had been summoned from Earth feel the need to do something as ambitious as leading a revolution in another world? Why did she need to go as far as declaring war on other kingdoms? Rio considered the possibilities.

A revolution could not be created alone. It began with the ideas of one or more people who acted on their beliefs, gaining power by gathering like-minded comrades, creating a revolution as a result. Leading such a thing required a great amount of mental strength, far above that of the average person.

If revolutions could be started over mere discontent at royalty and nobility, they would be a common occurrence. It was the tremendous amount of resolution required that made it so difficult to execute one.

With his memories as Amakawa Haruto, who was born and raised in

Japan, Rio could understand the issues of the class system of royalty and nobility. He had been the subject of plenty of prejudice from their children while attending the Royal Academy, but that hadn't made him feel the need to start a revolution in Beltrum in retaliation.

The only part of himself he could apply to the saint in an attempt to understand her was his vendetta against Lucius. Not everyone sought revenge just because they resented someone—but Rio did, and pursued his vengeance.

That was because he couldn't forgive him. There was something he couldn't forgive, and that something caused strong enough emotions in him to enact his revenge. Did the saint have strong enough feelings about something to cause a revolution?

Did something happen after she was summoned, causing her to resent those in power and start a revolution? Or did this world just happen to summon a radical with extreme initiative by coincidence...? Rio tried to imagine what motives the saint would have for causing a revolution.

There was no doubt she was Japanese. That alone made it unlikely for her to be so dead set on destroying monarchies from the beginning. Amakawa Haruto had never seen a Japanese person set out to overthrow a government —and succeed—in his twenty years of life. She was just too different from his image of the average Japanese person. However, he still lacked information to profile the saint properly.

"Why was Liselotte kidnapped by the saint in the first place?" he asked, seeking more information about her.

"Everything started when she visited the estate in Amande. She sought the Ricca Guild's power and came to recruit its president to her cause. She asked Lady Liselotte to lend her nation her strength."

"Of course, Liselotte refused that, right? So the negotiations fell apart, which was when she caused a commotion?"

"That's the general gist of it, yes."

"May I ask what the two of them discussed at the time, for reference?"

"They began with the matter of scouting Lady Liselotte and the Ricca Guild, before she criticized the monarchy and declared that the country should be handed back to the people. Then..."

"Then...?"

Aria hesitated for a moment, making Rio prompt her to continue.

“Umm, I actually haven’t informed His Majesty of this part, but the saint saw through Lady Liselotte’s secret. She apparently heard the name of a product upon arriving at Amande and realized the truth. The saint apparently excels at lipreading.”

“I see...”

“After she brought up Lady Liselotte’s secret, the two of them started questioning each other in turn. Lady Liselotte mostly asked about the saint’s background, but the saint only asked about trivial matters like her name and age from her past life, where she lived, and so on.”

“Was there anything that struck you as odd in that conversation?”

“When the topic shifted to my master’s secret, the saint’s personality suddenly... It softened until she was like another person, like a woman with a bright and warm personality... She said that that was her true self before she became a saint.”

“Her true self before becoming a saint...” Something about that seemed off to Rio.

“She said she was creating a world with no weakness, and that in order to do so, she was creating a democracy of the people, for the people, by the people. I don’t know what she meant, but she said it was part of her grand revenge.”

“Grand revenge...”

That didn’t sound very peaceful.

In which case, something must have happened after she came to this world after all. Something so severe, it snatched away her peaceful values as a Japanese person... Since she’s advancing under the banner of abolishing monarchies, I guess it must be a grudge against people in power?

Rio himself had dirtied his hands with vengeance in spite of his memories as someone from Japan. Of course, those who were transferred here were different from those reborn here, and it was his judgment as Rio that had made the ultimate choice, but he had certainly experienced inner conflict he wouldn’t have felt without the memories of his former self.

Amakawa Haruto had only been able to enjoy his peaceful values as a Japanese person because Japan was peaceful. After personally experiencing the way human dignity and life were disregarded in this world, those peaceful values were naturally shaken. Rio was aware of that as well.

What if the saint had experienced something horrible enough for her to

seek revenge and create a revolution? That was Rio's assumption, but...

It's pointless to hypothesize further at this point.

He decided to stop thinking about the saint's situation. He wanted to get a picture of her before attempting to rescue Liselotte, but making her into an emotionally relatable person based on speculation didn't seem wise.

"From what I've heard, it seems she views figures of power as her enemies... But since she kidnapped Liselotte after going out of her way to recruit her for the Ricca Guild's power, it doesn't sound like she sees Liselotte herself as a target of her resentment. Her willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve her goal is somewhat concerning, though..."

If she wanted Liselotte's cooperation, she wouldn't resort to violent means immediately. That meant she would be safe for the near future, Rio surmised.

"Yes. However, that woman merely appears to have an incoherent and forceful personality. I believe she's actually calm and cunning, calculating everything carefully before taking action."

"Are you saying she's acting that way on purpose?"

"Yes. She may appear to be foolish, but she is no fool by any means. From her speech and conduct, it is clear she has received a proper education. She even said she was a scholar of some sort in her original world herself."

"I see... If the series of events was completely calculated, it's highly likely that she abducted Liselotte to wage war on the Galarc Kingdom. She didn't seem to have any intention of negotiating from the beginning, and the declaration she made before leaving the castle only backs that up."

"Indeed. I came to the same conclusion after seeing her attitude at the castle. She didn't seem to have any intention of negotiating in Amande either."

"What I don't understand is *why* the saint wishes to go to war with Galarc. No matter how much she hates the monarchy, she must have a reason to go straight to war with a major kingdom. Otherwise it'd be self-destruction."

Furthermore, Galarc was no normal major nation: it was a major nation with a hero. Satsuki's existence should have spread across the world since the banquet. If she was aware of the Ricca Guild, she must have known about Satsuki as well.

Starting a war with Galarc unknowingly was thoughtless, but doing so knowingly just seemed suicidal. It was unimaginable for the representative of

an entire nation bearing the fate of its people. It would be one thing if she wanted to lead the country and its people to ruin on purpose, but...

Could her reason for wanting revenge actually be...? No, it shouldn't be... That's too unlikely.

The possibility of that road of destruction being the exact revenge she sought flashed through Rio's head.

However, the idea was so absurd, he ended up dismissing it. It was the exact opposite of the salvation she claimed she was bringing to the weak. She was the saint who had led the revolution and established a country. There was no reason for her to destroy it again—that would mean she was deceiving the people she had just saved. Which left...

Does she have a trump card up her sleeve? Something that makes her absolutely certain of her victory against a major nation. Something that gives her the confidence to pick a fight.

From the present amount of information he possessed, he had no idea what kind of trump card would give her such high prospects against a major nation. Rio felt an uneasy restlessness about it.

"By the way, did the saint arrive in Amande for negotiations alone?" Rio suddenly asked after breathing a sigh to expel his worries.

"Yes. Just like at the castle, that woman appeared in Amande by herself and asked for a meeting. She then high-handedly forced her opinions on us without listening to us."

"I see... It seems she left Liselotte in the hands of a different squad after abducting her, then appeared in the castle without a single guard. In which case, she probably didn't want them to be hindrances."

Either that, or attending the negotiation alone gave her the ability to fabricate what had happened as much as she wanted. This saint was worshiped as the representative of a foreign nation, so her words would never be doubted. If she wanted to start a war, she could do so at any moment. That was another possibility.

The only thing that can be said for certain is that the saint seeks war with Galarc...

Rio gazed in the direction of Saint Erica in the distance, pondering the likeliness of war with a stern expression.

"Is something the matter, Sir Amakawa?" Aria noticed the grim look on Rio's face and cocked her head in confusion, but Rio brushed her off with a

smile and changed the topic.

"No, it's nothing. Anything further than this is mere speculation, and overanalyzing things wouldn't help. Were there any other things you noticed?"

"Let me think... I don't know why, but the saint said she needed to keep her hero status a secret. On the last question the two asked each other, she answered in confirmation and suddenly attacked."

"She needed to keep it a secret? So she had a reason she couldn't declare herself a hero. If we were to interpret it plainly, it means she must have had plans to announce it at a better moment..."

"That, or if she was already planning to aggravate the Galarc Kingdom at that point, she just took the first excuse to attack. Of course, she may have intended on announcing it at a more beneficial moment as well..."

"We really cannot speculate too much, I see. It's fine, we'll leave the goals of the saint at that. All that's left are her abilities, but..."

Rio casually glanced at Aria's face as he carried her. Since she had been present at the meeting between them, that meant the saint had abducted Liselotte regardless of Aria's presence. In other words, Aria had been bested by her. Given how well Rio knew Aria's abilities, he wondered how things had gone down.

"If it was just in terms of close combat, her techniques were nothing overly impressive. It was like an amateur swinging a weapon blindly, only the weapon was powered up dramatically just by her holding the Divine Arms," Aria said, recalling the fight with a pained expression.

"Even so, she wouldn't have been an opponent for you, right...?"

"Everything was brought about by my negligence. I thought I had neutralized her with a hard blow, but I had not."

"You applied enough force to neutralize the average opponent?"

"Considering how her body was enhanced by the Divine Arms, I struck her in the abdomen with enough force to send a heavily armored soldier flying through a shield. I followed that up with an even more powerful kick to the same area. When I confirmed she had fallen to the ground lifelessly, I assumed she had fallen unconscious."

"That means even if she had a powerful enhancement solidifying her body, she should have taken damage..."

Unlike magic, which could only enhance one's physical abilities, the

sorcery from enchanted swords and spirit arts could reinforce the physical body itself.

The strength of that enhancement depended on the competency of the sword or caster, but it generally removed the pain from actions like punching a boulder or iron with bare fists, and greatly reduced the damage from blunt weapons against unarmored areas.

However, if someone similarly enhanced suffered a heavy blow, it was extremely difficult to reduce that kind of damage to nothing.

“It was as though that woman was completely unharmed. She pretended to fall unconscious to catch me with my guard lowered, using that opening to make her move. As you said, her Divine Arms may have applied a powerful physical enhancement. Her speed wasn’t impressive, but her strength definitely was.”

“I see...”

“The last ability to note is probably another effect of her Divine Arms—she was able to attack while creating phenomena that resembled earth magic. If you ever have to face her, please watch out for that.”

“Understood.” Rio’s expression hardened as he nodded.

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At the same time, in the skies above the outskirts of the Galarc capital...

While Rio and Aria pursued the saint from a distance, someone else was pursuing them from far behind. It was Reiss; he’d been tracking the saint since her visit to the Proxia Empire. He had witnessed her abduct Liselotte in Amande and march into the Galarc Castle alone, though he had no idea how far she was willing to negotiate with the kingdom.

The fact the Black Knight started pursuing her means the saint’s relationship with the Galarc Kingdom is done for. What an ideal turn of events.

Reiss analyzed the situation and grinned creepily.

The Black Knight departed at the same time a powerful spirit presence disappeared from the castle—most likely that humanoid spirit changing into spirit form to follow after the saint. And right now, Celia Claire and those close to him are in the castle. With the most troublesome two trailing after the saint, they should be shorthanded right now...

Reiss glanced behind himself at the capital beyond the horizon. With Rio and Aishia both gone, wouldn't this be the perfect chance to grab a hostage? That was the thought passing through his mind.

However, our future response will greatly depend on how well the saint can use her hero powers. The Black Knight and his contract spirit are the perfect test subjects for that. I can't pass up on the chance for our two greatest annoyances to eliminate each other—I'll have to make sure they get the chance to face each other...

It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. In order to make the most of it, he couldn't afford to lose sight of Rio, and he had to conduct himself carefully.

I cannot risk them noticing my movements and becoming wary of the Proxia Empire. For now, I'll continue shadowing them while thinking of a plan. He has quite the fearsome detection range, so I must take extra care...

With that thought, Reiss continued his pursuit.

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Meanwhile, at the Galarc Castle, Celia and Miharu had returned to Rio's mansion on the castle grounds with Satsuki and Charlotte, where they explained what had happened to Latifa and the others waiting in the living room.

They shared that Liselotte had been kidnapped by a hero who called herself a saint, and that Rio, Aria, and Aishia had gone after her. Charlotte found it strange that Aishia wasn't present, but they explained that Rio had called her along without stopping to explain things. The telepathy part was purposefully not mentioned.

"I can't believe such a thing happened..."

The spirit folk girls were clearly in shock.

"Why would a hero do such a thing...? Aren't saints meant to be good people? Why did she kidnap Liselotte?" Latifa questioned with a conflicted mix of worry and anger on her face.

"I don't know what basis the heroes are selected on, but I guess this means there's no guarantee the people who are summoned are good. There's no telling what kind of person she was in her previous world either..." Satsuki said with a bitter expression.

"The title of saint doesn't guarantee a good personality either. Especially

since she's only a self-proclaimed one right now. It isn't uncommon for people to be hailed as saints just for getting caught up in the matters of politics and power. It pains me to say this about a hero, but I found her qualities to be far from those of a saint," Charlotte said, not mincing her words.

"Argh, just thinking about her is making me angry again. What was her problem? Everything that came out of her mouth was absurd, and how dare she take Liselotte...!" It seemed like Satsuki's rage had reached its limits. Unable to sit still any longer, she stood up from her chair to vent her anger.

"Let's believe in them. Haruto and Ai-chan went together. They'll definitely rescue Liselotte and bring her back."

Miharu wasn't being overly optimistic by any means—she was actually quite worried herself. But because she had utter faith in Rio and Aishia, she was able to soothe everyone present with her words.

"That's right... I agree with Miharu too," Celia said in agreement. "All we can do from here is pray for their safe return."

Their words resounded in everyone's hearts.

"Miharu, Celia..."

Satsuki looked touched.

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“Onii-chan and Aishia would never lose to anyone when they’re together.” Latifa’s voice was cheerful once again.

“Right.”

“Agreed.”

“Indeed.”

Sara, Orphia, and Alma giggled along in agreement.

“It’s exactly as everyone says. The only thing we can do is maintain a normal life here for Sir Haruto to return to. There’s no doubt the nobles of our kingdom will have split views over this incident, so I’ll do what I can to minimize the effects on Sir Haruto and Liselotte,” Charlotte said eloquently as she expressed her enthusiasm.

Satsuki was able to pull herself together with that. “Thanks, Char... If there’s anything I can help with, let me know. It’s not my usual style, but I’ll do what I can as a hero.”

“That would be much appreciated. The nobles will only get more impatient as they wait for Sir Haruto to return.”

“And we don’t know when that will happen...”

Rio had begun his pursuit with no idea of Liselotte’s location. The amount of time it would take to rescue her depended heavily on her location. She could be within the country, or she could be far away in a foreign land.

“If Haruto’s return gets prolonged, we should probably get in touch with Gouki on his behalf,” Orphia said to Sara beside her.

“You’re right. He’d be concerned if his return was late.”

“Did he have plans to meet with someone?” Charlotte asked.

“Haruto had plans to meet with some acquaintances of his. Since he may not be able to fulfill that promise, we might leave the castle to update them on the situation.”

“I see. Let me know whenever you need to leave. I’ll explain things to Father for you.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Not a problem. I shall return to the castle now.”

“Oh, you’re leaving already?” Satsuki asked as Charlotte stood up.

“Yes. I need to ask Father about our plans for the future. I will let you know if anything new happens, so everyone may relax here.”

“I see... Thanks, Char.”

“This is merely my duty as royalty. Leave it to me.”

With those words, Charlotte left the room.

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Chapter 2: On the Journey

Nearly one hour had passed since Rio began pursuing Saint Erica. In that time, the saint had mounted a griffin and taken off from the road to continue her journey by air.

"They've begun their descent. There doesn't appear to be any city or village nearby," Rio said, pointing at the griffin the saint's escort was riding.

The longest distance Rio and Aishia could remain in telepathic contact with each other was slightly over one kilometer, but they were maintaining double that distance right now just to be cautious. Rio only moved within contact range to communicate when necessary.

"I see..." Aria mumbled after a beat.

A human with an enhanced physical body was able to see clearly two kilometers into the distance, so she could confirm the griffins' descent as well. However, what the saint was seeing two kilometers ahead was different to what they could see from their position, hidden out of her line of sight. It should have been impossible for Rio and Aria to identify whether there was a town or village near the saint. Until now, there had been numerous times where Erica was completely out of sight, yet Rio spoke as though she were right before him, which Aria found strange.

"It seems like they're going to stop by a small spring in the forest. Perhaps they're taking a break. We should land at a farther distance to them." Rio started lowering his altitude, moving within a one-kilometer range of Aishia.

He says there's a spring in the forest, but there's no way to see past the trees from here. Before we left the castle, he said there was no way he'd lose track of her within a one-kilometer range, so he must have some way of obtaining information without the use of sight...

Aria took in a breath while forming her hypothesis. There was something about Rio that she couldn't read—his many layers and extensive knowledge were reassuring as an ally, but imagining him as an enemy made a chill run down her back.

At any rate, they had almost reached the ground. While the saint and her

company had landed in the forest beside the spring, Rio and Aria descended outside the forest.

"Here you go." Rio set Aria down on the ground.

"Thanks." Aria stepped on firm soil for the first time in a while.

He wasn't holding his sword while we moved, so his flying can't be explained as an effect of his enchanted sword anymore. How did he do it? Flying for a whole hour should consume quite a large amount of magic essence as well...

She was curious, but didn't want to ask any prying questions. As a warrior, it was impolite to ask questions about other people's tactics.

"They're resting the griffins after all. It doesn't seem like they're joining up with anyone, so they'll probably depart in another half hour or so."

There was no way of seeing one kilometer into the forest, yet Rio spoke as though he could see and hear their conversation.

"I see..."

Did he have no intention of hiding his abilities? Aria paused awkwardly.

"You must be wondering how I can see or hear them," Rio commented.

"There's no need to force yourself to tell me. There are many enchanted swords with absolute abilities, so it's only natural to keep it secret. As an ally, just knowing you are capable of such abilities is enough. There's no need to explain any further—in fact, it's more than enough information as is."

Powerful enchanted swords were special. There were very few of them in existence, and they contained ancient sorcery that could grant a single soldier the power of an entire army. For some kingdoms, having their enchanted swords stolen meant their power was halved.

Thus, be it for an individual, nobility, or a nation, the management of enchanted swords was vital. The weapon's abilities would be wasted in the wrong hands, and whoever wielded it had to be both compatible with the weapon and trustworthy as a person. Some people changed when given the increased influential power of an enchanted sword, and at worst, they could betray the kingdom and run off with the sword, which was why there were many swords that remained untouched in treasuries.

Besides, as Aria had said, it was an ironclad rule to keep one's enchanted sword's abilities a secret. Knowledge of abilities meant the preparation of countermeasures—for a fight between two enchanted sword wielders, the side that knew more was at an absolute advantage. There were no strategists

who revealed all their cards, after all.

"You're a trusted confidant of Liselotte's, as well as an important friend of Celia's. I believe you're not the type to speak thoughtlessly, so I'll explain some of the details. I'm not using my enchanted sword to track their positions," Rio said, expressing his trust in Aria to reveal his secret.

"Then is it some kind of magic artifact?"

"It's actually Aishia who's helping me track them. We have a way of contacting each other within one kilometer's range without using long-distance transmission artifacts like the kingdom. She's the one who's telling me what's happening by the spring."

"So that's how you did it..."

The transmission artifacts used by the kingdom were only capable of sending one hundred characters of text at once, and it was clear Rio hadn't used such a tool on the way. Aria had already realized he was gaining information through another method.

"In addition, while the range is a little shorter than an artifact, there's no risk of any interception. We're not sending each other messages, but talking to each other through our minds."

"That sounds extremely convenient... It seems useful despite the short range."

Aria understood the importance of communication speed in business and politics through her work for Liselotte. Whoever had the information first was able to respond earlier, and having someone who could provide live updates during a negotiation allowed for better handling of orders. She could think of many other situations where such a thing would be useful. There were also ways of abusing such an ability. If the other side had no awareness of such a communication form, bets could be easily manipulated in one's favor.

"I actually asked Aishia to track the saint from the moment she left the castle. Aishia is capable of flying just like me."

"I see... It's truly reassuring to have Lady Aishia's assistance." Aria was surprised to hear Aishia could fly too, but was more pleased to hear about the unexpected reinforcements.

"In terms of tracking, even I can't rival Aishia. It's impossible for anyone to detect her presence, so she's able to see and hear things even at this moment. Apparently, Erica is heading for her home country."

The saint had shown alertness for any pursuers numerous times along the way, but she was yet to notice Rio and Aria following her—there was no way she'd detect Aishia in her spirit form like that. Humans couldn't detect spirits in their spirit form. Just like how spirits couldn't interfere with reality in their spirit forms, reality couldn't interfere with them in reverse.

Their magic essence flowed out in spirit form, but that essence blended in with the magic of the natural world. An experienced spirit art user would only think there was more essence in the area, while a reading from a magic-measuring artifact would be dismissed as a malfunction.

"She's been moving northwest ever since she left the capital. That is in alignment with the direction of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica."

"Then it's almost certain that they sent Liselotte back to their country ahead of themselves. They haven't referred to her whereabouts even once until now, and they haven't mentioned stopping anywhere for a detour."

Holding a hostage outside of one's area of control was taxing on the mind. It'd be one thing if they could retrieve them in a day, but it was otherwise easier to just send the hostage back to their country first.

"I see..." Aria cast her eyes downwards and clenched her fists.

"It would be ideal if we could ambush the saint while her guard is lowered during her break, forcing her to speak. It'd be three against two—I doubt we'd lose with you and Lady Aishia on our side," Aria said, suppressing her rising emotions and suggesting the option of an ambush.

"Indeed, this would be the perfect timing for an ambush. However, I'm worried about the saint's claims that Liselotte will be executed if she doesn't return by a certain date. I can't imagine she'd treat a hostage so recklessly, so it's most likely a bluff, but..."

"As long as we don't have concrete proof, we shouldn't ambush them. If we act, it should be after confirming my master's location. I apologize for presenting such a thoughtless suggestion," Aria said as though to convince herself, biting her lip and bowing her head in apology.

The detestable enemy who had abducted her master was cheerfully resting a short distance away in the forest. It was only natural for her to feel the urge to do something about it. The fact she was able to control herself was proof she was still calm and composed. She hadn't made the suggestion because she seriously thought a surprise attack was for the best.

"It's fine. There are things we might not notice just by thinking by

ourselves. Even if it's obvious, voicing your opinion is a vital part of determining validity. I considered making a surprise attack for a brief moment as well, so let's keep telling each other whatever comes to our minds." Rio seemed to read Aria's strained emotions and spoke gently to soothe her. His consideration for her feelings seemed to reach her, and Aria bit her lip.

"Right. Thank you."

This won't do... I shouldn't act like this around someone younger...

She reflected on her lack of composure. For some reason, he felt oddly mature compared to her. It wasn't just his politeness—she actually felt like she was interacting with an older man when she was near him. Celia must have been drawn to that part of him as well. Aria was having the same experience right now.

"There's still some time until they depart... *Dissolvo*."

Rio poured his magic essence into the ground through his feet, leveling the dirt before using the Time-Space Cache to set down the stone house.

"Wha... What is that?"

Aria looked up at the stone house in shock. She wasn't normally the type to show expressions on her face, but her reactions were rather vivid today.

"I explained the Time-Space Cache to Liselotte in front of you before, right? This is how I carry around my portable house. It's made to look like a boulder for camouflage."

There were also special barriers that prevented it from being perceived by others, but those spells were disabled while it was stored away.

"Indeed, you did. But...a portable house?"

According to Aria's common sense, a house wasn't portable. It was definitely not something that could be carried around. Especially not a house—no, a rock of this size.

"Please, come inside. It'll serve as our accommodation on our journey, so I'll give you a tour during our break."

Rio had grown accustomed to the reactions of people seeing the stone house for the first time, so he merely smiled faintly before walking to the front door. He briefly introduced the main rooms to Aria before they took their break, then resumed their pursuit of the saint.

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Several hours later, after two more breaks for the saint and her company, the group continued northbound towards the belt of small kingdoms.

"It's almost sunset. They should be stopping at the nearby city for the night," Rio said, looking at the western sky as he flew.

Griffins had great night vision, so they were capable of flying even through the night. However, their human riders having limited sight in the dark made it more difficult to secure a resting point; it was better to move in the daylight, when the ground below wasn't a black abyss.

It was likely that they didn't feel an urgent need to return as quickly as possible. Erica's party was going to refrain from moving at night, according to the information Aishia provided during the earlier break.

A few mere minutes later, Erica and her company started descending on their griffins.

"They've begun their descent. It seems like they're going to stay the night in the city over there. We should descend as well." Rio also lowered his altitude, moving within contact range of Aishia.

Aishia, let me know once the saint finds an inn. I'll enter the city in the meantime. Let me know if anything abnormal occurs.

Understood.

With just the necessary messages exchanged between them, he landed in a rocky area off the road.

"I'm going to set the stone house up here. Would you happen to know what crest is on the flag of that city over there, Aria?" Rio asked, hoping to confirm their location.

"That's the family crest of Margrave Baudrier. He's a noble of the Galarc Kingdom. From the size of the city, this is unlikely to be the capital of his territory, so it's probably ruled by a governor..." Aria's reply was immediate, having memorized every noble family crest in the kingdom.

"Thanks, that's a great help. I'll go speak to the governor and ask if we can use the transmission artifact to contact the castle. You wait here in the house."

"I understand. Thank you for taking care of that."

Aria didn't seem too content about waiting alone in the house, but the risk of running into the saint in such a small city was too great. It was better for only one person to move on their behalf, and Rio was better positioned to negotiate with a representative using his noble status. Aria wasn't so

incompetent that she would let her eagerness get in his way—and so she nodded obediently.

"The magic artifacts inside the house can be used as I explained earlier. You can eat whatever you find in the kitchen, and help yourself to the bath. Please rest up in preparation for the upcoming days of pursuit."

"I appreciate your consideration."

Aria bowed gratefully. With that, Rio started off towards the city.

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Around the same time Rio entered the city and arrived at the governor's building...

The saint's found an inn, and he has entered what seems to be the governor's estate. Since the head attendant is waiting alone outside the city, they probably don't plan on making a move here. That means Liselotte Cretia isn't located in this city. I guess he's gone to ask to contact the royal castle, hmm?

Reiss observed the city from the sky, tracking the movements of his targets within the city walls. He made accurate assumptions about their respective motives just from their positions and actions.

If they continue at this pace without any detours, they'll reach the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica within a few days... I'll need to make the necessary orders by tonight.

Reiss placed a hand against his mouth as he decided how to move forward. He'd have to look away for a few hours to go and give his orders, but it was better to have as much preparation time as possible. The later he delayed his orders, the less time those receiving them would have to prepare.

Troublesome Rio and Aishia had their attention focused on the equally troublesome Saint—there was no way he could pass up this opportunity where their forces were divided. Thus, it was important he gave orders for one of his pawns to move. And if he were to go with the plan that had the highest chance of success...

Considering where his attention will be directed, it would be best to have the Heavenly Lions move this time. It's about time they worked to avenge their commander.

Reiss decided to mobilize Lucius's subordinates.

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"I've returned, Aria," Rio said, returning to the stone house outside the city one hour later.

Hmm...?

A mouthwatering scent greeted him as soon as he opened the door.

"Welcome back, Sir Amakawa." Aria appeared in the living room past the entryway, bowing courteously. She was wearing clothes out of Aishia's wardrobe with Aishia's permission—Aishia usually wore her self-materialized clothes in her physical form, so her store-bought clothes rarely saw the light of day. Right now, Aria was wearing an apron.

"I'm back..."

"I used your ingredients to prepare dinner." Being the beautiful girl that she was, Aria looked good wearing anything, but the impression she gave in an apron was completely different to that of her attendant clothes.

"Thank you. It smells delicious," Rio said, slightly surprised.

"Everything is ready to be served immediately. Will you eat first or bathe first?"

"Err, I'll eat first. But let me wash my hands before I do that."

The exchange with Aria, one that resembled typical newlyweds, was a refreshing feeling for Rio, who nodded with a gentle smile before heading towards the washroom. After cleaning up, he returned to the living room.

"Have a seat at the table," Aria prompted from the kitchen. Rio was about to offer to help set out dinner, but she'd beaten him to the punch, so he sat down. Soon after, the food was brought out to the dining table.

"They're all simple dishes, so they might not compare with your cooking..."

Aria set down a golden-brown asparagus and mushroom quiche, a pot-au-feu with plenty of bacon and bite-sized vegetables, a salad, and a creamy pasta dish.

"Not at all. It looks so good." It was his first time eating Aria's home cooking, but she had to be an experienced cook to prepare so many complicated dishes in less than an hour.

"Thank you. Please, dig in." Aria bowed in gratitude and encouraged Rio to begin eating. She then poured him a drink and stood beside the table like an attendant.

“Umm, are you not going to eat too? You haven’t eaten already, have you?” Rio looked confused at the lack of Aria’s share on the table.

“I am merely an attendant. After forcing my way into accompanying you on this journey, I cannot possibly join you at the table.”

The relationship between Rio and Aria was that of an honorary knight and the attendant of another noblewoman. Aria fully understood that she didn’t have the status to eat with him and drew a clear line to show it. It was completely normal for nobles to eat under the watch of multiple servants, but...

“Umm, I’m not really used to noble customs, so I can’t really relax under such stiff circumstances. Can we eat together? Preferable while we talk casually,” Rio suggested awkwardly. He knew there were situations where it was more appropriate to behave according to his social status, but having to keep up the noble act when he was with others just felt suffocating.

“Of course... If that is what you wish.”

Thus, Aria joined him for the meal. Once plates for two were set down on the table, they began to eat.

“Let’s dig in.”

“Yes.”

Rio started with the pot-au-feu. The steaming hot vegetables had been boiled in the broth until the flavor had seeped through, melting in his mouth.

“It’s delicious...”

There was no way it wouldn’t be. Aria was the head attendant serving Liselotte. While Liselotte probably had personal chefs that made her meals, it wouldn’t be odd for Aria to prepare meals when the situation called for it. Her cooking skills were inevitably top-notch.

“That’s great.”

Aria smiled in relief and sliced the quiche with her knife and fork elegantly, carrying it to her mouth.

“That aside, I was able to contact the castle without any issues. I informed them that we’ll be leaving the kingdom, so our return will be delayed. The message should reach His Majesty by tomorrow. Transmission artifacts bear a risk of information leaks, so I didn’t mention Liselotte or the saint by name,” Rio said, reporting on his outing.

Magic artifacts used for communication could be viewed by anyone with a receiver within transmission range, so the messages sent tended to be rather

abstract to avoid those risks. Rio had only specified their arrival near Margrave Baudrier's territory, their intent to leave the kingdom, and that their return would take at least a week.

"Thank you for handling everything."

"It's no problem at all. I should thank you for this delicious meal." Rio took a bite of the quiche, savoring it in delight.

"..." Aria paused in handling her cutlery and stared at his face.

Rio looked back curiously. "Is something the matter?"

"No, but how should I put this... I'm just so glad you're here, Sir Amakawa. I think I understand why you're adored by Celia and so many others now. I can't put it into words, but there's a mysterious charm about you," Aria said with a gentle look.

Rio looked bashful, but confused. "What's up all of a sudden? Your compliments on me are wasted."

"When I think about how Lady Liselotte was kidnapped, I feel my anger rising at the Saint and my own powerlessness. But when I look at you, all that pointless anger dissipates, calming me down. Thanks to that, I'm able to forge ahead with my mind and body in the best possible condition."

Aria's determination could be glimpsed in her expression, tensing fiercely. It wasn't as though her will to rescue Liselotte had relaxed—if anything, it had intensified. But being impatient wouldn't help, and that was what Rio had taught her. She could only do what she could. Just like Rio, who had silently done the same until now.

"When you asked to accompany me back at the castle, you had a tormented look on your face. While I don't know if that's a good thing or not, I prefer the look on your face right now. I don't recall doing anything special, but if my actions have had a good effect on you, then I'm glad," Rio said, smiling gently.

"It must be that part of you..."

Rio steadily pushed forward with his own values when it mattered the most. But he never forced his own views onto other people. Of course, he would explain his thoughts when asked, but he first showed them through his actions.

That's why he made her think. By watching him move forward silently, she was made to consider her own actions and what she wanted. It was probably that part of him that attracted others. The realization made Aria's

lips break into a soft smile.

Rio tilted his head, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

Aria shook her head abruptly. “It’s nothing. More importantly, Lady Aishia has been continuously watching the saint until now. She must need relief from her shift soon—if it’s something I can do, I’d like to take the night shift.”

Of course, it depended on how Rio was communicating with Aishia, but she hoped to lessen the burden if it was a method she could use as well.

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that... I also offered to take the night shift, but I was rejected as it was unnecessary. Aishia is able to work without the need for food, water, or sleep breaks.”

Aishia was a spirit, after all. She enjoyed eating and could immediately convert what she ate into magic essence for replenishment, but they were all unnecessary things to a spirit. She slept a lot, but that was because she enjoyed sleeping—if she wanted to, she was able to continue working without any sleep.

However, Aria was still unaware that Aishia was a spirit, so Rio was unsure of how to go about explaining that.

“Huh...?”

As he feared, Aria had a questioning look of confusion. That was only natural, since he had just said she didn’t need what were essential factors of human survival.

“It’d be easiest for you to see for yourself, but I can only explain it verbally for now. Which works out just as well, since I can explain some other things at the same time. For example, that my flying isn’t an effect of my enchanted sword.”

Of course, it was possible to fly using a sword as a catalyst to produce wind, but that wasn’t what Rio had used on the way here. His sword had been in its scabbard—he hadn’t even held it in his hand.

Rio’s sword was capable of refining magic essence for assistance in spirit arts, and amplifying the power of spirit arts by wrapping it around the blade, but it wasn’t always a necessity to activate the arts from the sword as an origin.

Since arts were activated from the sword, which was separate to Rio’s body, it wasn’t suited for casting any art that directly affected the caster. Its sword shape also had limits, such as needing to be held by the handle of the

sword.

In other words, it was easy to activate and control spirit arts that centered on the sword, such as wrapping the blade and slashing, launching something by thrusting, or stabbing the sword into something. But using the sword as an origin point meant there was an extra process involved, so there were cases when the activation speed dropped or had a negative influence.

For example, suppose he activated a spirit art on his sword, then had to change the target of that art to another target. If he was going to cast an art on someone else, there was no need to use his sword in the first place. If Rio wanted to fly in the air, using his sword to activate the art would offer no benefit and merely take more time.

“I’m sure it isn’t something you should be spreading indiscriminately, so are you sure about this? I assume it’s a secret on par with a powerful enchanted sword.” Aria was curious, but had enough honor not to ask for an explanation right away.

“It’s as I said earlier—you’re Liselotte’s trusted confidant, and Celia’s important friend. That’s why I believe you’re not the type of person to go around spreading rumors. In order to rescue Liselotte, I’ll end up doing things that can’t be explained by an enchanted sword. I do not wish to lower our chances of a successful rescue by hiding my abilities,” Rio said, listing the reasons for informing her.

“In that case, allow me to explain my enchanted sword’s effect first. It wouldn’t be balanced otherwise... Although it still isn’t balanced like this. But please allow me to do so as a sign of my trust in you, Sir Amakawa,” Aria offered decisively.

“Are you sure you don’t need Liselotte’s permission?”

The enchanted sword belonged to her, after all.

“I will get retroactive permission from her. There’s no doubt she’ll approve of this. If she doesn’t, I will take responsibility for it.”

“But even so...”

“The hesitation you’re feeling is the same as what I feel towards you disclosing your secret,” Aria protested as soon as Rio expressed uncertainty.

“I understand... We can both reveal our abilities,” Rio nodded with a strained smile, deciding to listen to Aria talk about her enchanted sword.

After that, Aria revealed her enchanted sword’s ability and combat style based on it to Rio. The enchanted sword she possessed was called Lethal

Bringer, which could enhance the slicing strength of the blade and slow the healing of any wounds it caused.

On the other hand, Rio told Aria about spirit arts and the fact Aishia was a spirit. Since it was an extensive topic, he only gave her a general summary of things, but Aria was still made to listen to a much longer explanation than she had given.

“I feel like that wasn’t something I should have listened to after all... The information I offered really can’t compare,” Aria said after they’d finished their explanations of each other’s situations. Her expression stiffened at the clear difference in their information value. She was surprised to hear about spirit arts, but she was especially shocked by the fact Aishia was a spirit.

“It was necessary in order to raise our chance of rescuing Liselotte. Now Aishia and I can use the full extent of our powers.” Rio shrugged in a joking manner, trying to brush off Aria’s worries. In reality, his actions would be limited if he had to hide his strength from her. Instead of having to worry about how to explain each and every move, it was much easier to give her the information beforehand and loop her in on the facts.

“However... I still feel like I’ve become an excess burden on you,” Aria said gloomily.

“That’s definitely not the case. There’s no knowing what will happen at our destination. Since the enemy’s strength is unknown, it’s very reassuring to have someone of your abilities come along. Most importantly, Liselotte will also feel safer with the person she trusts the most there for her,” Rio said clearly, without hesitation. He wasn’t trying to be considerate—he merely believed that from the bottom of his heart.

I wasn’t able to protect my master, who trusted me so much, though...

A guilty look flashed across Aria’s face. However, she couldn’t afford to keep looking at the past. She had to rescue Liselotte—she yearned to. In order to do that, she would do whatever she could. Her gaze met Rio’s, who stared straight at her from across the table, and she found fresh determination within herself.

“I truly cannot thank you enough, Sir Amakawa.”

With a fleeting smile, Aria gave Rio a look of deep impression.

Chapter 3: Holy Democratic Republic of Erica

Roughly one week ago...

Northwest of the Galarc Kingdom in the band of minor nations, at its very northernmost end, stood the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica. In a room of the mansion that was being used as the official residence of the head of state was Liselotte.

I'm beat... Truly.

After being abducted, she had been sent to the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica ahead of the others, as Rio predicted. She had been confined to this room for a week now.

Over this past week, she had considered all the ways she could escape from here. But there was no window in the room, the door was locked, there were guards outside, and her magic was sealed with cuffs.

Escape was far too difficult. Even if she managed to slip out of the room, she'd be caught by one of the guards in the mansion or soldiers in the city before making it out. And even if she managed to make it out of the city, she wouldn't be able to survive with no magic.

Without her magic, Liselotte was just a powerless fifteen-year-old girl. She'd learned self-defense before, but would easily be defeated if attacked by a group.

This was something she understood the day she was brought to this room, and no matter how much she thought about it, her conclusion didn't change. But that didn't mean she was giving up.

For one week, she had probed for a chance to escape. But the only contact she had during the week was when someone brought her meals. The person assigned to the task always left without saying anything, so she wasn't able to gain any information at all, much less probe for an escape route.

The saint had knocked her unconscious back in Amande, and she was already on a griffin headed for the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica by the

time she came to, so she hadn't spoken to anyone since meeting the saint.

The servants transporting her hadn't received any information from the saint, and she was blindfolded and gagged for the whole trip, so she wasn't able to gain information or make any protest.

I've really been cornered now... I know that kidnapping someone and isolating them for a week is a tactic to make them feel uneasy, but...

Understanding it and actually having it being done to her were two different things entirely. It gave her all the time in the world to think, and to realize she had absolutely no hope. It was the worst situation possible. But Liselotte wasn't the type to give up easily.

If I'm unable to use magic, escape is impossible. In which case, I'll have to remain confined. But I must return to the Galarc Kingdom. That's why I have to think of how I can return to Galarc in the current situation...

If she had all the time in the world to think, she'd just keep thinking about the same thing over and over again. Perhaps she might get a new idea. If there was a way for her to break out of confinement and return to Galarc...

It isn't realistic right now, but if I can get these magic-sealing cuffs removed, I can steal a griffin and escape. If their motive for kidnapping me is related to the Ricca Guild, I could try using that as a negotiation point. That, or I wait to be rescued.

She could either make a move herself, or wait for someone else to move first.

The best scenario would be to be saved by someone else, but that's just a convenient dream...

Her abduction was caused by her carelessness. There were probably people like her father, Duke Cretia, who would cry for her rescue, but there would also be people who would oppose it, saying it was her own doing—especially since it would mean opposing the nation formed by a hero. Not even King Francois could ignore the voices of the nobles. It was very likely he would be forced into sacrificing Liselotte for the sake of avoiding war.

The only chance of a rescue team being formed smoothly was if influential people like Duke Cretia asked Francois for her retrieval, and the mission was deemed to have a high chance of success.

However, if her father made such a request, the kingdom would be criticized for acting on personal reasons. She couldn't rely on her father this time.

There was also the chance people would move secretly in order to save her. However, if they infiltrated the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica in this situation, they would immediately be suspected of moving at the order of the Galarc Kingdom. Acting of their own accord would be seen as a betrayal of the kingdom.

And there's no one who would risk going that far for me...

There was one person who flashed through her mind, but such a convenient dream was impossible. It would be more realistic for her attendants to make a move.

However, Liselotte's attendants were smart enough to understand that they would be putting their master in a bad position if they moved without permission. Without King Francois's approval, they knew they could only watch on silently.

I hope no one feels responsible for this... Especially Aria.

Liselotte recalled the battle between Aria and the saint. Erica used a dust cloud to obstruct their vision and pretended to go after Liselotte while waiting for the moment Aria left the dust. Liselotte predicted her ambush and tried to warn Aria by calling out, but in doing so she alerted the saint to her position.

As a result, Aria reacted to the saint's ambush by stepping back, and barely managed to avoid the attack. She had an enchantment to enhance her body, so the wound shouldn't have been fatal. She may have even been unharmed. However...

If I hadn't called out to Aria...

Aria could have handled it without her help. That was the doubt chewing away at her mind. What if it were true?

It really is my fault...

Liselotte's beautiful face twisted with regret. When she imagined her subordinates being blamed for what happened, she was filled with apologetic emotions.

She wanted to tell them not to worry about it. They couldn't cause the Galarc Kingdom any further trouble than this. That's why...

I must return to Galarc no matter what.

Liselotte discarded her faint hopes of someone rescuing her and strengthened her determination on getting home herself.

Just because the situation was hopeless didn't mean she could be weak.

She had no time for being weak. Until now, she had carved her own path for herself numerous times. This time she would do the same.

The first step is to have a discussion. I have to sound out their intentions and attempt negotiating with them. They won't isolate me forever, and it's about time someone made contact.

If no one made contact with her, there would be no discussion to have. If they were waiting for her mind to weaken before negotiating, she would just have to turn the tables on them.

In a situation where she had no contact for a whole week, a visit would be her first chance to have a discussion. She wasn't foolish enough to abandon that chance.

After an imprisonment like this, if she wanted to show that her will was still strong, she should take on a rebellious attitude. Conversely, if she wanted to lure the other side into lowering their guard, she should act obediently.

However, both options had their demerits. Being too rebellious could make the other side unwilling to compromise, and acting too obedient may make them wary. If she wanted to avoid both those scenarios, she had to refrain from suddenly taking a dramatic stance and act neutrally.

For the situation this time, it may be best to seem somewhat fatigued. That was what Liselotte was thinking, but if there was one problem with the plan...

I just hope it isn't that saint that makes first contact.

It would be Saint Erica forbidding anyone else from making contact with her.

Honestly, I can't get a read on that person. Whether she's Saint Erica, or Sakuraba Erika...

Based on her experience in Amande, she would be the worst negotiation partner to have. In fact, her entire impression of her was the worst.

Saint Erica always spoke as though the conclusion was settled, so there was no way of seeing her thoughts. Sakuraba Erika also seemed to be disdainful and hiding her true thoughts. Liselotte wasn't even sure if she really had any intention to negotiate with her back in Amande.

I'm sure she'll make contact once she returns to the country, but I hope someone else comes before then.

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The next day...

That morning, after Liselotte finished breakfast, a man and a woman showed up along with the usual person who took away her plates.

One was one of the people who escorted her to this country, a female swordsman. The other was a man she had never seen before.

Apparently, the female swordsman was there as the man's bodyguard.

"Hello. I am the prime minister of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica —Andrei."

The man, Andrei, placed his right hand over his chest and introduced himself in a high-class manner. However, he seemed to be nervous, as his expression was rather awkward.

He's rather young for a prime minister. There's a naivete to him...and it doesn't seem like an act.

Liselotte analyzed him with that brief introduction, keeping her confusion to herself. A prime minister was an official position that supported the leader of the country, so it was customary for someone well experienced in politics to be appointed.

However, Andrei looked to be in his twenties. He seemed to be an agreeable youth with no sign of experience. The fact his nerves could be seen through by the noble of another kingdom meant he was far too unreliable for such a position.

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That being said, this was Liselotte's long-awaited chance at negotiation. While his unreliable appearance was worrying, his position was high enough to negotiate with.

"Hello, it's nice to meet you. I'm sure you know already, but I'm Liselotte Cretia."

Liselotte put on an air of exhaustion while giving a sociable reply to Andrei.

"Yes, I am well aware of you—or rather, the Ricca Guild. I formerly managed a trading company within this country."

"Why, I'm honored to hear that."

"I've heard rumors that the Ricca Guild's president is the daughter of a leading noble family, and Natalia over here informed me that you barely looked of age, but you truly are young."

Andrei stared closely at Liselotte's face. He wasn't underestimating her for her youthfulness, but rather observing her with a mix of admiration and curiosity.

"Err... You came here for business, right?" Liselotte asked, confused.

"Ah, pardon me. I came here today to show you the country."

Andrei cleared his throat lightly and stated his intent.

"Show me the country?"

"This country is a wonderful nation, and I'd like you to see that with your own eyes. That way, you may understand Saint Erica's greatness for yourself."

"You'll let me out of the room?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure...? You completely isolated me from others for this last week, and now you're suddenly letting me out?"

"Yes. Everything is as Saint Erica ordered."

"I see... I'd like to ask what the intentions are behind such orders, but..."

"Saint Erica's thoughts are as she explained in Amande, she says. She wishes for you to join the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica."

"I believe I declined that offer repeatedly. I was barely able to speak through my gag, but I told Natalia over there the same on the way here. I begged for her to return me to the Galarc Kingdom," Liselotte said, glancing at the female swordsman standing behind Andrei.

"Mr. Andrei, this woman is an arrogant noble with no understanding of

Saint Erica's benevolence."

This was it. Natalia seemed oddly insistent on treating Liselotte as an enemy. It seemed to be caused by her status as a noble, but part of it was probably fueled by her strong loyalty to Saint Erica too.

On the road here, she'd tried to explain what had happened in Amande and how Erica's actions were a severe international problem, but Natalia had paid her no heed. As a result, she was deemed an annoyance and gagged instead.

"It seems there was a slight misunderstanding...with Saint Erica, and with Natalia."

Andrei let out a troubled sigh.

"A slight misunderstanding, you say. I was suddenly attacked and abducted by Saint Erica, brought to this country unjustly..." Liselotte objected quietly, questioning how the current situation was "slight" in any way. She kept her voice from harshening, but her expression and tone were stiff with discontent.

"Regarding the fact you were restrained by Saint Erica and brought to this country... Natalia said those were the orders from Saint Erica."

Andrei looked at Natalia and accepted a part of the truth—that Liselotte had been moved here by Natalia, who was working in tangent with Erica.

"In that case, I would like to hear your opinion on the present situation, where a foreign citizen has been forcefully kidnapped to your country," Liselotte asked with a sharp look. However...

"I believe in Saint Erica. And I am unable to answer any further questions regarding the situation on behalf of our leader. Please speak to Saint Erica directly about any ongoing misunderstandings you may have. As prime minister, my words have the risk of becoming the nation's words, so please understand."

Andrei clearly stated his helplessness in regards to confirming the facts about Liselotte's kidnapping.

Erica was the leader of the nation, and Liselotte was brought here from another kingdom. The one in the weaker position was Liselotte right now.

With no trust in Liselotte, there was little chance of the other side believing in what she said. If she presented her claims wrong, they'd stop listening to her entirely.

No matter how much she claimed herself the victim, there was no way

Andrei and the others would feel ashamed and regretful, apologize, and send her on her way back.

"I understand... But please understand that I do not view this as a 'slight misunderstanding', but rather as a serious international problem."

Instead of raging with anger, Liselotte gave a warning with a sigh.

It was easy to show contempt for Erica here, but it was just as easy to imagine how Andrei would react to hearing someone he worshiped be insulted. She had to refrain from making enemies while in a situation with no allies.

If she was able to speak to Erica once she returned, she could just save her criticisms for then. That was the decision she made.

"I'll keep it in mind."

"So what do you want with me while Saint Erica is away?"

"As I've mentioned already, this nation is a wonderful place. I'd like you to see that for yourself. If you are a good person, you'll surely be willing to cooperate with Saint Erica once you learn about this nation. Then your misunderstandings can be cleared," Andrei replied with utter conviction.

Did he really just come here to show me around? At a time like this?

Having expected some other form of negotiation, Liselotte felt disappointed.

"I don't get it. How can you be so certain? I understand that you're here right now on Saint Erica's orders, but you're aware that I'm a foreign noble that has been forcefully brought here. How can you still believe in her so strongly?"

His belief in Erica was so strong, it was like she was looking at a puppet. She couldn't see Andrei's own thoughts anywhere, giving her an eerie feeling.

"It's simple. Please think of Saint Erica's will as my will," Andrei answered without any hesitation.

"I...see..." Liselotte murmured, her inner disappointment growing stronger.

She'd had a faint inkling of it to begin with, but it seemed they were rather devout believers of Saint Erica. As long as they remained like that, there was no way they would accept her words. However, there was one thing she didn't quite understand.

I really...don't get it. Why is that saint worshiped to this degree?

As far as Liselotte knew, Erica's image was far from that of a saint, yet the top of this country had intense belief in her.

Just what did she do to be revered so much? Did she have some kind of secret? That's what Liselotte couldn't understand at the moment. Which was why...

"Okay... Could you please show me around, then? You're right; I know nothing. Not about Saint Erica, nor this country."

If he was going to teach her, then she might as well learn. If he was going to show her this country, then it was the perfect chance to gather information. Being too cautious wouldn't help her make progress. Taking the first step was vital.

"You are a wise woman. It's no wonder that Saint Erica found promise in you. Now, please follow me."

Andrei nodded in satisfaction, then called Liselotte over to the door. Thus, Liselotte left the room for the first time in a week.

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Liselotte left the mansion with Andrei, Natalia, and several guards that were there to keep her under surveillance.

Andrei stopped outside the front door and turned back to Liselotte. "May I ask how much understanding you have of our nation?"

"The Holy Democratic Republic of Erica was formed after your revolution overthrew the previous monarchy. I am, however, unaware of the events leading up to the revolution itself."

"There are countless minor kingdoms in the northeast of Strahl constantly at war with each other, but the Rivanoff Kingdom our revolution took place in was unrelated to the fighting. Our major industry was agriculture, yet our lands were dry. We didn't have other untapped resources, and our lands held no military value, located as they are at the ends of the north. It's also cold all year round," Andrei explained with a hint of self-deprecation. "There has never been any benefit to be gained from attacking their country."

"..."

Liselotte neither affirmed nor denied it out loud, but she agreed with him on the inside. The revolution of a small kingdom to the north was impactful, but the long distance from Galarc and lack of military presence caused their

information gathering to be postponed.

"All the kings in Rivanoff's history were terrible at governing. They used the lack of value in our nation to their advantage by joining the Proxia Empire, then lived safely under their protection while making sure only the loyal noble families could live in luxury. The people were oppressed as a result, and the revolution occurred as backlash."

"In other words, even without Saint Erica, a revolution was inevitable?"

"You could say the foundations for a revolution already existed. However, there's no doubt that the revolution wouldn't have happened without Saint Erica. The despicable noble class were too greedy and cunning, and we citizens were simply too ignorant and uninterested in politics to do anything about it. We were unaware of our country's situation and never defied any injustice from the monarchy. We allowed ourselves to be exploited without resistance."

"And the one that changed that was Saint Erica?"

"Yes."

"Status doesn't matter. Humans are born equal, with equal rights to live. That is the greatest rule of this world, decided by the gods themselves. At the end of the day, royalty and nobility are humans as well. It is wrong for them to create unfair laws and use their power unjustly."

Andrei started by stressing this, then continued.

"Saint Erica bestowed our ignorant selves with that knowledge. She was the one who got things rolling and gave us the courage to oppose royalty. She saved our people from their despair. In order to prevent the citizens from dying in the revolution, she stood at the front and led the way."

The passionate tone in his voice was backed by his personal experience, but it was just a second-hand account to Liselotte, who hadn't experienced it herself.

"I don't know what Saint Erica did in this country. If you say she saved the suffering people, then I'd say that's wonderful, but it's not like I saw it with my own eyes. That's why I'm struggling to understand why you believe in her so unconditionally," Liselotte said truthfully.

In other words, she was unable to believe in Erica based on words alone, and the blind faith she was seeing from Andrei just made her impression of the saint more incomprehensible. The main reason for that was what happened in Amande.

“You can simply learn from here on. She takes the initiative for the weak, creating miraculous results with her miraculous power. This nation is one such result. For the time being, I shall show you one part of Saint Erica’s miracle work.”

Andrei chuckled with a proud smile, then started walking towards the gate.

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Their current position was a several-minute walk away from the building where Liselotte had been confined.

“As you may have heard already, this is Ericaburg, the capital of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica. It was originally the royal capital of the Rivanoff Kingdom. The building you are staying at is the head of state’s residence at the outskirts of the noble district,” Andrei explained as he walked in the lead.

“So this area would be the former noble district?”

“Yes. Isn’t it a lively area?”

“There are a lot of people, but they’re all workers. There’s construction going on everywhere...” Liselotte looked around at her surroundings in confusion.

Everyone walking on the streets appeared to be either a worker or assistant. There were no ordinary citizens to be seen. They were all energetically calling out to each other and bustling to do their jobs.

“The people marched on the castle during the revolution, destroying most of the noble district. We’re currently in the middle of selecting land and buildings for government buildings, then constructing them in order of priority.”

Most of the buildings in the noble district had been completely ruined. Those along the road to the former castle were in an especially terrible state. The road itself was also gouged in certain places, making the destruction stick out like a sore thumb.

Scars from their revolution, huh? The anger of the instigators is evident.

Liselotte observed her surroundings with a conflicted face. As someone in a governing position, this wasn’t a matter she was unfamiliar with. The rage of the people accumulated before exploding—even Amande could end up

like this.

"The traces of destruction are especially bad in this area. See that pile of rubble over there? That's where the royal castle used to stand." Andrei pointed in the direction they were walking, to a point roughly one hundred meters away.

"The royal castle?" Liselotte looked doubtful. There was nothing that looked like a castle in the direction Andrei pointed. However, that was the only spot that seemed oddly empty, a mountain of rubble and dirt. It was as though there used to be a building there that was larger than the surrounding structures. The scenery gave off an odd feeling.

"Yes, it used to be there. In the past tense. Saint Erica destroyed the castle during the revolution, burying the royalty inside it," Andrei stated indifferently.

"What?!" Liselotte was shocked.

"You'll be able to tell once we get a bit closer. There used to be a hill over there, and the stone castle was built on top..." Andrei said, continuing forward.

"Saint Erica destroyed it by herself?" Liselotte asked, hurrying after him.

"Yes, in one blow," Andrei answered proudly.

"One...blow...?" Liselotte fixed her gaze on the mountain of rubble. The scale of the castle that once stood there could be inferred by the position and size of the land. It may have been a small kingdom, but it was still a castle for a king. The castle would have been built on a good foundation with sturdy materials. Besides—

There used to be a hill there, and the castle stood on top... And both were flattened in a single blow? That would be impossible even with the highest class of attack magic.

While it wasn't as resilient as dragon skin, castle walls were often painted with a special material that had high magic resistance. It was unclear if that had been used on the castle that used to be here, but it was an unbelievable feat even if it wasn't. It was just unrealistic for the castle and hill to have both been destroyed in one blow.

Liselotte managed to ask a question through her speechlessness. "How so...?"

Andrei could sense the disbelief in Liselotte's reaction and grinned proudly. "I told you already. The Saint has a miraculous power. Every

member of the revolution's army can attest to it."

"Is it the power of her Divine Arms?"

"Divine Arms?" Andrei looked puzzled.

"They're the legendary weapons possessed by the heroes summoned to Strahl. Saint Erica had a bishop staff, right? That's her Divine Arms... Were you unaware she was a hero?"

"Y-Yes, it's my first time hearing of such a thing. I have heard the rumors of heroes descending in certain kingdoms, but..."

Andrei nodded with wide eyes. A remote kingdom of this size would have difficulty obtaining much information. Judging from his reaction, Erica hadn't revealed that to them.

"I see..." Liselotte murmured.

That Saint hid her hero status from her own comrades. She said she wanted to keep it a secret just before she snapped in Amande as well...

She had set aside her questions since there was no one to answer them, but what was the reason for that? Her curiosity was piqued anew.

Could Satsuki and the other heroes do something similar with their weapons?

As far as Liselotte could remember, the greatest display of a Divine Arms she'd seen was when Hiroaki manifested the Yamata no Orochi water dragon in his match against Rio. Hiroaki didn't seem to have complete control over it, but after summoning every water dragon, his power was on par with the strongest class of magic. But even a direct hit from a water dragon wouldn't be able to destroy a hill.

Legends tended to get more exaggerated over time. When Liselotte saw Hiroaki control the water dragon, she mistakenly assumed that Divine Arms could create phenomena on par with or slightly better than the highest class of magic. Even that was enough to be a formidable power.

However...

Could the true potential of the Divine Arms be even greater than that? Several times the highest class of magic... Enough to blow away a small hill in a single blow, at least?

It wasn't just a formidable power—it was a threat. It would take an army of ten thousand to have a chance against someone like that. That was how much power the heroes held.

But at the present moment, it was hard to say if the other heroes had that

much power. They had the same Divine Arms, so there was no reason they couldn't do what the Saint could do, but at the very least it was impossible for Hiroaki, who couldn't even manifest the full Yamata no Orochi against Rio.

Does the Saint know how to draw out the mysterious power of the Divine Arms? Maybe she wanted to hide her hero status to keep it a secret. Even if she ended up at war, a secret like that would be a huge advantage against any enemy.

If an enemy army had no information whatsoever, there would be no way for them to counter such a move. It would be foolish to show off one's powers in that situation. If the Saint's power was connected to her Divine Arms, the kingdoms that possessed the other heroes would try to bring out their powers as well. The Saint may have wanted to prevent that.

She had no proof, but that was the conclusion that Liselotte reached. It was a vital piece of information, so it was fortunate that she was able to realize it by being kidnapped. And now she had something to do as a noble of the Galarc Kingdom.

I need to find out more information about the Saint—no matter how trivial.

For example, what happened to the Saint after she came to this world. Why did she decide to become a saint? Just then...

"Miss Liselotte?"

Andrei called out to her. He seemed surprised to hear the Saint was a hero, but how much understanding did he have of the heroes? "Saint Erica is a hero? If that's true, then how amazing," was the unconditionally accepting impression he seemed to give off. After calming down from expressing his delight, he looked at Liselotte, who was frozen in place.

"Ah, I'm sorry, I was just so shocked..."

Liselotte awkwardly smoothed over her expression with a smile.

"It was worth bringing you here first, then. Do you understand now?" Andrei asked, smiling in great satisfaction.

"Understand what, exactly?"

"The reason why we follow Saint Erica."

"I want to say you follow her because of the power she has, but that isn't the case, is it?"

The power they abided by changed from political power to pure violence.

Erica possessed the strength to crush political power itself. Liselotte indirectly pointed out such an interpretation with her question.

"It is not. She is the symbol of justice itself. She thinks of the people more than anyone else. Saint Erica only uses her power for the sake of saving the weak. She isn't a saint because of her tremendous strength. She has her tremendous power because she is the Saint. That's why we believe the future lies in the direction she proceeds. We'll watch her back and follow in her steps. Saint Erica is our guiding light," Andrei emphasized without a shred of doubt on his face. He had absolute trust in her. Perhaps trust wasn't the most appropriate word.

"Your faith in Saint Erica almost sounds like you're worshiping a deity. One on the same level as the Six Wise Gods."

Yes, it's faith, Liselotte thought.

There were no religious followers that doubted their god. Saint Erica had established a position for herself as the object of their worship. Her title of "saint" was also being embodied.

"Undoubtedly. That's what a saint is, is it not? Many of the people in our country see Saint Erica as a prophet that mediates between us and the Six Wise Gods, or even as a reincarnation of the Six Wise Gods. If you say she's a hero, then it was only natural for her to be worshiped like this. The heroes are the disciples of the Six Wise Gods." Andrei looked completely confident in his words; his faith for the saint had been backed up by the title of a hero. after all. His emotions seemed to be riding a high after learning that Erica was a hero. He probably saw her as an even more exceptional figure now.

Saint Erica isn't being worshiped because she's a hero. The object of their worship just happened to be a hero, so their faith grew even stronger. That faith will only grow stronger from here on out...

A glimpse of that process was happening before Liselotte right now. Considering how Saint Erica was hiding her hero status, there was no way she was acting without a plan.

Did she have some kind of grand plot planned? Was her current status as a figure of worship a part of her plans?

How much of this is all a calculated act? Liselotte swallowed her breath.

She was more curious than ever as to when and why Saint Erica began her movements. There were many things she wanted to ask, but—

"This is merely out of curiosity, but you said Saint Erica did this in a

single blow, right? Just how did she go about destroying a castle and the hill it stood on?" She started with an easy question.

"She struck the ground with her staff. That was all," Andrei answered proudly.

"That's all she did?"

"Yes. To be precise, she struck the ground and a shock wave ran through it..."

"Like a strong earthquake?"

It didn't happen frequently, but earthquakes did happen in Strahl. In the battle between Saint Erica and Aria as well, the bishop's staff had blown up the dirt when it was struck into the ground. Liselotte had believed Erica's Divine Arms had the power of controlling the earth, so she feigned calmness in order to confirm that now.

"The ground did shake at the impact, but it wasn't an earthquake. It's hard to describe accurately, but it was like the ground ripped open in an explosive wave. The shock wave gained momentum and lifted the ground up, and once the ground started collapsing it rose up, swallowing the entire hill, castle and all. Ah, even the memory of it is awe-inspiring," Andrei explained, choosing his words. Indeed, it must have been difficult to explain a phenomenon that could swallow an entire castle.

"I'm sure it must have been an amazing sight..."

The result of which was laid out before them. If the revolution army was marching upon the castle, there would have been non-military personnel taking refuge inside. Some may have had no will to fight and were just in the castle to work that day. Unless they had evacuated people in advance, there would have been innocent people buried within that rubble. Liselotte gazed upon the destruction with a pained face.

"Yes, it was beyond imagination." Andrei nodded firmly in praise of the Saint's great feat.

"But wasn't it a waste to destroy the entire castle? You could have reused the building, and I'm sure there were food and treasures stored inside."

If they retrieved the treasures and food first, they would have had a chance to warn the people inside as well. Liselotte asked her question in hopes of that.

"Indeed. I am a former merchant, so I agree with you there. Fortunately, it seems we'll be able to retrieve the treasures, and the royal castle was a

symbol of the evils of the monarchy anyway. A negative piece of heritage, if you will. We couldn't allow it to remain standing," Andrei said with a slightly conflicted expression.

"Including the evil royals and nobles inside?"

"They were a necessary sacrifice. There were some of the noble class that agreed with the Saint's ideas, and the only ones remaining in the castle at the end were those who opposed her with hostility."

"I...see..."

Liselotte didn't ask any further questions. Instead, she shot a sidelong glance at the remains of the destruction and closed her eyes in silent prayer.

"We didn't condemn anyone on the grounds of merely being of the noble class. Some nobles are prejudiced by their status, but we know that there are nobles out there who care about the people. If they agree with Saint Erica's teachings, we are willing to extend our hand to them. How about you?" Andrei turned to Liselotte with a judging look.

"I too dislike any actions of tyranny towards the people. I don't believe myself to be superior just because I am a noble. However, I was raised on the side that you call the exploiters, as a privileged-class citizen. That's why I cannot deny that I may view and react to things differently to you, a member of the side that was raised oppressed."

Liselotte gave her honest opinion without trying to make herself appear perfect.

"What a good and sincere answer. I've seen many nobles give hollow agreements that they don't believe in just to be spared, but you really are different." Andrei beamed widely, showing off his white teeth.

"I'm honored. Would you be willing to tell me more? I believe a conclusion can only be reached with a proper understanding of this country and Saint Erica." Liselotte bowed once and stared at Andrei.

"Indeed, it is as you say. I'd like to show you to some other places, so let us talk as we move. First is the area where the general population lives. This way, please."

In a delighted tone, Andrei began leading the way with a skip in his step.

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On the way from the castle ruins to the city area...

“In our country, legislation is conducted by the assembly members that participate in congress. They also make some of the political decisions. The leader of the administrative body is the head of state, who acts as the representative of the nation.”

“So you’ve dispersed the legal and administrative rights the king would have had under the monarchy.”

“Exactly.”

“How are the congress and head of state selected?”

“In an indirect election where the citizens select the congress and head of state voters through elections, then each voter puts forward their vote for the head of state and congress members. In the first election, the leading members of the revolution were selected as the first congress, and the Saint was selected as the head of state.” Andrei explained the governing system behind the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica as they walked.

“Who came up with that selection system?”

“The general framework was made by Saint Erica. However, there are some points that are still at an impasse, so we’re still in the midst of establishing the basic laws around that system.”

Erica’s draft of the system was probably used as a temporary provision to make the election for the first head of state and congress.

“I see...” She couldn’t be sure without reading the actual laws, but to Liselotte it sounded like they were extremely motivated in implementing a democracy.

“What’s important is that participation in politics is widely available, and that the country moves according to the will of the people. The monarchy may have moved according to the will of the noble class, but catering to only the privileged class is what led to the exploitation of the lower class,” Andrei said, emphasizing how the nation ought to be.

“So by expanding the scope of who can participate in politics, you’ll make it harder for the participants to make light of matters... If the result will affect them, they will feel responsibility behind each and every decision. There are many laws that nobles approve of because it doesn’t apply to them, after all,” Liselotte said. There was no need to listen to the opinions of those who didn’t participate in politics, so it was easy to make judgments about things that didn’t apply to oneself.

It was undeniable that a monarchy made it easier for laws to only benefit

those who participated in politics. And that the burden tended to be shifted onto the people...

"Ah, how wonderful. Saint Erica told us the exact same. Humans are equal. That is why we must eliminate the laws that are used unequally."

Andrei seemed pleased with Liselotte's statement, as his eyes were sparkling with passion.

"I think it's a good thing for the higher-ups of the country to keep the will of the population in mind. That will strengthen their sense of responsibility towards the people," Liselotte said, agreeing with the ways of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica. While her intention was to make Andrei feel good by speaking positively about the country, she did think it would be ideal for such a thing to happen. That's why she wasn't lying.

"Yes, yes. It's important for those elected to have such things in mind. We cannot leave the country in the hands of someone with no responsibility over the people." He must've been enjoying the discussion, as Andrei closed the distance between himself and Liselotte eagerly.

"Y-Yes, I agree," Liselotte nodded, nearly pulling back.

"The original plan was to show you our congress, but now I can't wait to do so—there'll be one held this afternoon to establish the basic laws. We debate every day over it, so it would be a good opportunity for you to see our strong sense of self-awareness. Ah, and please read over the proposed laws as well—I would love to hear your thoughts on them."

"Why, I'd be very interested in that. I shall look forward to it." Liselotte put on an unsettled but friendly smile.

It's not like I'm saying anything I don't really think, but...

In order to avoid rousing suspicion by suddenly asking about the saint, she was agreeing with whatever he said to obtain information. But Andrei's reaction was so earnest, it left her feeling a little guilty.

I thought he was a little young for a prime minister, but could they be lacking in people with political experience?

Andrei was a good and honest man. However, an honest man was a bit too unreliable to have as a prime minister. A prime minister shouldn't believe in others easily—if anything, they should constantly be alert. He would be better off as a scholar than a politician, Liselotte thought, when—

"Hmph."

Her eyes met with Natalia's, who was escorting them without

participating in the conversation. Natalia watched Liselotte's harmonious conversation with Andrei and snorted in discontent. Perhaps she thought he was being swayed by the attention of a beautiful noblewoman.

"That aside, could you tell me more about Saint Erica?" Liselotte ignored the gaze from Natalia she could feel and instead asked Andrei what was most pressing on her mind.

"Sure. What would you like to know?"

"I know nothing about how she came to be called a saint, so if we could start there? Was she already a saint when you first met her?" If she learned of how Erica became a saint, perhaps she would be able to see something new.

"The first time I met her—or rather, the first time I saw her—she had yet to be called a saint. There was no doubt she was already planning the salvation of the people at that point, though... I've asked her the same question because I was curious as well." Andrei looked back on the memory with a fond smile.

"If you don't mind, would you be willing to tell me her answer? I'd like to hear why she became a saint."

"All right. Saint Erica did give me permission in advance to tell you if you expressed interest in hearing it," Andrei said as a preface. "From what I was told, Saint Erica originally lived in a small village with her fiancé."

"With her fiancé?" Liselotte cocked her head.

But if I recall...

When Erica asked Liselotte if there was someone she loved in Amande, Erica had mentioned that she shouldn't do anything that she'd regret. Which meant...

"Unfortunately, he has already passed away." Andrei shook his head sadly.

So her fiancé was dragged into the hero summoning...then died because of some kind of circumstance.

"Saint Erica said some kind of situation led her and her fiancé to the village."

According to the legends passed down in the Strahl region, there were six heroes that had participated in the Divine War period. The heroes arrived from afar, summoned through the sacred stones, and the kingdoms that possessed those stones kept them under strict security.

It's hard to believe a sacred stone capable of summoning a hero was kept

at a village, but it's not like the location of every sacred stone was known to begin with. Perhaps it lay undiscovered somewhere near the village. Then, when the time came, the summoning happened, Liselotte hypothesized.

In reality, there were four kingdoms in the Strahl region known to have sacred stones. The one stored in the Galarc Castle that summoned Satsuki, the one in Beltrum Kingdom that summoned Rui, the one the Restoration took from the Beltrum Castle that summoned Hiroaki, and the one in Centostella Kingdom that summoned Takahisa. Out of the remaining two, one that summoned Renji lay untouched by an isolated forest spring. And the last one was, as Liselotte guessed, lying undiscovered on a mountain near a remote village.

"Her fiancé had already passed away, so she didn't say much about that village, but she said she decided to become Saint Erica because of her fiancé's death."

"How did he pass away?"

"A powerful person came to the village. He was killed trying to protect the village from them."

"Her fiancé must have been a wonderful man..."

"Yes, apparently so. He extended his hand to the suffering people, worrying about others before himself, Saint Erica said. After she accepted his death, she decided to continue his legacy..."

"I see..."

In a world where the lives of royalty and nobility weighed more than those of commoners, unfortunate events like that were bound to happen.

"After witnessing the death of her fiancé, Saint Erica grieved, raged, and sank into utter despair. Why do people stand on top of other people? Why are people not born equal? Why do they use the status they obtain to hurt others? She started to strongly resent the world that created people of power. Then, she received a divine revelation, telling her to save the world."

"A revelation...?"

What a fishy word to suddenly bring up. Revelation—a word that meant God had granted humans a truth they normally wouldn't be able to perceive.

"Earlier, by the wreckage of the castle, I said our nation sees Saint Erica as a prophet, didn't I?" Andrei said with a proud smile.

"No, but... Was it true? When you say revelation and prophecy, you mean Saint Erica received the divine will of the Six Wise Gods?"

Liselotte stared closely at Andrei. She seemed to think it was a made-up story, and strongly implied that he must have been joking with her gaze.

Andrei gave a strained smile at Liselotte's reaction. "Why, it's only natural to feel surprised. There were many people who treated her as an oddball at first. The fallen King Rivanoff also treated her as a heretic until the very end."

Anyone who opposed authority by proclaiming themselves a saint carrying the word of the Six Wise Gods would naturally be treated as a heretic. The people in power would declare her a witch and have her executed. That was probably what happened in reality too.

"Do you have proof? That Saint Erica received the prophecy from the Six Wise Gods," Liselotte said in a flustered tone, something rare for her.

"No one other than Saint Erica can receive the word of the Six Wise Gods. There is no way of proving such a thing."

Indeed, that would be the devil's proof.

"That...may be true..."

But without proof, there was nothing to believe.

"Besides, not even a prophet can continuously be connected to the will of the Six Wise Gods. Prophecies aren't the be-all and end-all."

"Then why do you believe in her prophecies?" Liselotte asked.

"There are three reasons for that. The first is because all of Saint Erica's prophecies have gone exactly as she said; for example, that she would overthrow the Rivanoff Kingdom and establish a new nation in its place, for the sake of the people. That was what she predicted, and that was what she made happen."

"..." Wasn't that simply because she had a goal, and the means to make that goal happen? That was the rebuttal that immediately came to Liselotte's mind, but she held herself back from actually arguing. Instead, she waited for the other two reasons.

"Another is because of her power. Saint Erica said she was bestowed a power humans aren't meant to use because of the prophecy. Then she used that power to perform miracles wherever she went."

"Such as destroying the royal castle in a single blow?"

"It wasn't only destruction. She healed injuries without using magic, converted wasteland into fertile soil, and changed the land to alter the river's flow."

Those are all phenomena caused by the Divine Arms... But Satsuki did say she was taught how to use the Divine Arms by someone in a dream when she first came to this world, right? Someone spoke to her one-sidedly in a dream... Could that be the prophecy?

She wasn't certain, but she suddenly recalled what Satsuki once said and wondered if that could be related to this.

"The third reason is that Saint Erica's words can be trusted unconditionally. That is how strong the trust is between us. Of course, we don't just trust her because she is strong—she earned that trust because she's continuously used her power for the salvation of the weak. Before she was called a saint by the people, she wandered from village to village after the death of her fiancé, performing miracles wherever she went, helping free the weak from the tyranny of the strong without compensation. I met Saint Erica in the middle of that journey."

There was no one who would doubt the words of who they worshiped. In other words, the fact she had built her position up to the point of being worshiped as a saint was the third reason. However, while everything up to the point of her fiancé being killed made sense, everything afterwards was a little hard to believe. If she had the power of a hero, it wouldn't have been impossible for her to make people believe she was a prophet.

That's what Liselotte doubted. However, the dream that Satsuki once told her about also weighed on her mind.

Satsuki said she saw a dream that taught her how to use the hero's power. Perhaps whoever appeared in that dream was the same one who gave the Saint her so-called prophecy, and taught her how to bring out her Divine Arms' power even further? But wouldn't whoever appeared in the dream be the Six Wise Gods?

There was no way of confirming her hypothesis, but that just made her imagination grow more wildly. Liselotte was lost in her thoughts with a mystified look on her face.

She was meant to be in the middle of a tour, but the impact of that information had made her forget that. Andrei took that chance to question her again. "Well? Do you believe in Saint Erica's prophecy now?"

"Honestly, I'm half-dubious," Liselotte answered truthfully.

"Haha. You truly are a sincere person. Your excellent upbringing and righteous values allow you to have a careful outlook of the world. That's why

we'd like you to lend our nation your strength. Now, we're almost at the central area."

Andrei seemed to have felt their conversation up until now had been worthwhile, as he gazed at her passionately while inviting her towards the middle of the city right before them.

Interlude: Meanwhile

In the Paladia Kingdom, where Rio had settled his revenge with Lucius, the man who murdered his mother...

Ambassadors from the Proxia Empire were visiting First Prince Duran in the royal castle, the day after Rio and Aria began their pursuit of the saint. They were the six subordinates of the late Heavenly Lions commander, Lucius, their number including Arein, Lucci, and Ven.

However, the only one in the meeting room with Duran was Arein. The other five waited outside the room for their discussion to conclude.

“It’s been a while. Haven’t seen that squad uniform on you in some time...”

Duran ushered Arein into the room while heavily seating himself in the head seat. However, when he saw Arein’s outfit after entering the room, his eyes widened. Arein was wearing the uniform of the Heavenly Lions.

Most mercenary jobs involved either war or doing the dirty work that kingdoms couldn’t publicize. When mercenaries participated in war, they would wear their own squad uniform to make their squad’s achievements apparent, but they never wore the uniform while doing dirty jobs. Arein had been working for the Proxia Empire for the last few years, so it had been a while since he had donned his squad uniform.

“We came on behalf of Mr. Reiss, but it seems like we’re about to get a job we can claim credit for as the Heavenly Lions. And so, I’d like to get straight down to business,” Arein began.

“I am aware. You’re after your commander’s memento, the enchanted sword, right? Reiss said he’d send a replacement sword, though. You didn’t come barehanded, did you?”

Duran grabbed one of the two swords standing beside him. But instead of handing it over, he tapped the tip of the hilt against the floor. “Yes. The five outside the room are holding onto it.”

“Oh?”

“May they be allowed inside?”

“I don’t mind.”

Duran jerked his chin, signaling the knights by the door to open it. The knights nodded silently and opened the door.

“Excuse us.”

The five squad members, including Lucci and Ven, entered. They were all wearing the uniform of the Heavenly Lions, and they all carried two swords each as they stood behind Arein in his seat.

“That’s quite a few swords you’ve brought. The deal was for a smaller number, I believe.”

A total of ten was no small number when it came to enchanted swords. Duran’s eyes widened when he glanced at the five people standing behind Arein.

“There are three powerful enchanted swords with special abilities and physical body enhancement, and seven weaker swords with just physical body enhancement.”

“Are you saying to choose between the three swords, or the seven?”

“No. I’m offering you all ten.”

“Bwahahaha!” Duran broke out into hearty laughter.

“Did I say something funny?”

“You fool, the deal’s too good to be true. What’s the trick?”

A single enchanted sword could raise the military prowess of a small nation. For a minor kingdom, even three enchanted swords was a lot.

“It’s also an apology for being late to this deal after being the ones to make the offer. We’ve been incredibly busy these days, you see.”

“Still sounds suspicious...”

Duran stared at the man seated opposite him with his sharp eyes. There was an implied request to help them in times of need in exchange for the ten enchanted swords.

“Well, yes. It’s also our intention to strengthen the Paladia Kingdom, whom we are allied with.”

“I see.”

“The weaker enchanted swords are the same as those our squad members are using. They’re more like imitation enchanted swords than real enchanted swords.”

“Imitation enchanted swords, you say... It almost sounds like enchanted swords can be manufactured. Although their abilities are limited to physical

body enhancement...”

“Yes, exactly. It’s not like they can be produced in the hundreds, but just between you and me, these seven swords were created in the empire.”

Incidentally, the reason why they were late to retrieve Lucius’s enchanted sword was because it had taken some time to prepare this many swords.

“Oh?” There was a glint in Duran’s eye.

Enchanted swords that could enhance the physical body instead of just affording physical abilities were considered ancient artifacts that were impossible to reproduce with Strahl’s modern sorcery. If a knight that could only use physical ability enhancement magic faced a knight with an enchanted sword for the physical body, the one with the enchanted sword would win by a landslide.

Enchanting just the abilities meant the results were limited by the body’s limits, whereas enchanting the physical body altogether allowed one’s movements to surpass the body’s limits. If a small squad of soldiers was formed with enchanted swords equipped, that squad would be extremely formidable on the battlefield.

“Well, the sorcery effect is a little weaker when compared to the ancient enchanted swords. But even then, if one of your subordinates equipped one, they’d easily be able to take on several knights of the surrounding kingdoms.”

“What a terrifying country the empire is.”

“It’s not the empire that’s terrifying, but Mr. Reiss.”

“A mysterious man indeed.” Duran’s brow furrowed at the thought of such a creepy person.

“But we don’t care about what the empire wants anymore. Will you return it to us? The commander’s memento.”

Arein and the mercenaries standing behind him stared sharply at Lucius’s sword. They seemed rather fixated on the item, which was a memento of their commander.

“Well, I have no reason to decline. They say that enchanted swords choose their own user, but this one seems extremely picky. Neither I nor any of my subordinates could use it. It’d be a waste of a fine sword, so take it. I’ll take your offer.”

If he was to pick a treasure, he might as well pick the usable one. Duran placed the enchanted sword Lucius had once used on the table before him.

“Lucci.” Arein ordered the large man standing behind him to retrieve the sword.

“Right.” Lucci immediately walked to the table and picked up Lucius’s sword. The gazes of all the squad members followed the sword with furious glares.

“Please do away with the bloodlust, all of you.”

Duran shrugged with a sigh. He could tell the bloodlust wasn’t directed at himself, so he didn’t criticize them for it too harshly. He understood—the mercenaries before him had the expressions of men about to head for war.

“That aside, would you all have any interest in working for me? I’ll reward you handsomely.” It was probably his natural disposition that spurred his attempt to recruit Arein and the others.

“Thank you for the offer, but there’s something we must do.”

“Do you plan on avenging Lucius’s death or something?”

“Well, yes.”

“What rashness. Even if I equipped my subordinates with every sword in this room, I wouldn’t want to face that man.”

There was no stopping them. Duran recalled the fight between Lucius and Rio and looked around at the men with a pitying look.

“Yeah, but our target this time isn’t that bastard himself... We’ll be doing this fair and square, the mercenary way.”

Arein seemed to be thinking of someone who wasn’t present, as he glared into empty space with the look of a starved beast.

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Meanwhile, in the Galarc Castle, five days had passed since Rio and Aria left to track the saint.

“I’ll be going then.”

“Take care.”

At the entrance of Rio’s mansion on the castle grounds, Orphia was bidding farewell to Miharu, Celia, Latifa, Sara, Alma, Satsuki, and Charlotte; she was leaving in order to give Gouki and the others waiting at the spirit folk village an update on the situation. Their original plan was to return to the village within three weeks of leaving, so exceeding that period by days would be a cause for concern.

Orphia traveled to the gate of the capital in the horse carriage Charlotte prepared, then got off and resumed her journey alone.

Now, to find somewhere near the capital good for teleporting...

She didn't immediately use the teleport crystal to warp away because she still had something else to do. If she left like this, she would have to fly for two weeks to return. Bringing everyone in Gouki's group to Strahl like that would be difficult.

This was why she had to set up a teleportation spot in the outskirts of the Galarc capital so that Gouki's party could teleport directly from the village to Strahl. Somewhere preferably out of sight from other people, where there was ample magic essence in the natural surroundings.

It was decided that Orphia would be the best at finding such a location since she was a high elf with an affinity for ode and mana. She also understood teleportation sorcery the best out of the remaining members at the castle.

I'll start with a lap around the capital.

Orphia clenched her fists in a cute self-motivating motion, then enhanced her body to run to somewhere less populated.

Chapter 4: The Saint's Return

Nearly two weeks had passed since Liselotte was sent to the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica. Ever since the day she was allowed out of the mansion, she was given permission to go outside as long as she was accompanied by Andrei. Otherwise, she remained under confinement.

In spite of that allowance, Liselotte only went out to observe various places for the first few days. She soon stopped going outside, and was instead visited frequently by Andrei in her room.

Part of the reason was because the capital of Ericabrook was a small city with little to see, but it was mostly because their positions had reversed. The original goal was for Liselotte to learn about the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica from Andrei, but somewhere down the line, it turned out Andrei had more to learn from Liselotte.

Liselotte had retained her memories from her past life, gotten a noble-class education in her current life, and served as both the president of a trading guild and city governor for the past few years. Those experiences hadn't just been for show.

In comparison, Andrei was once the owner of a small business who had only just taken the position of prime minister, so there wasn't much he could teach Liselotte. He had received a crash course on his position from Saint Erica during the revolution, but it didn't take long for him to realize that Liselotte had a better education and experience suited for politics.

Andrei started bringing Liselotte questions about governance, and Liselotte went along with the discussions in order to obtain more information. That gave Andrei a favorable and intelligent impression of her, giving her more opportunities to ask her own questions.

"I see. So there'll be conflict between the rights of the people, you say... The citizens are more aware of their own rights now, so the conflicts will be more intense as well... What a fascinating theory. But how does that relate to the development of laws?"

Andrei was once again seeking Liselotte's advice at this very moment.

“If the people all claim their rights at once, it may cause conflict across the country. The more trouble there is, the worse public order will be.”

“Yes.”

“The people wouldn’t want that either. That’s why the resolution of such issues needs to be left to the country, for the government to handle.”

“Right...”

“When trouble actually happens, the ones who have to act will be those at the scene of the issue, and whoever conducts the trial. You understand this too, right?”

“I do.”

“But the best-case scenario is for no problems to occur at all. And in order to do that...”

“Our congress has to develop the laws.”

“Yes. The conflict of rights is one of the most important perspectives to have when developing laws for the people. To be more precise, by having this perspective, you’ll be able to envision when those rights will conflict, what situations will cause conflict, and what would be the right judgment to make in response.”

There were some cases where it was better to let the parties involved solve it themselves, and others where it was better for the nation to intervene as soon as it detected the problem. It was the role of laws to be prepared for such situations. Even if an unexpected situation was to occur, a new law could be created to deal with it immediately.

“It is exactly as you say. I see. Looking at it that way indeed relates to law development,” Andrei let out a sound of admiration as he came to understand her point.

“At the same time, the laws of the country need to be established quickly for the same reason. Conflict will happen more frequently in the immediate aftermath of a revolution, when everyone is hyper-aware of their rights. If the laws aren’t ready to handle that, the situation I just described will happen.”

“Haha, how painfully true. Indeed, we’ve been having such a hard time with the basic laws, we’ve neglected to address serious matters such as murder, assault, and theft. Saint Erica said the basic laws will become the backbone of the country, so we’ve been unable to create other laws without them...”

The basic laws that Andrei was referring to here were the equivalent of a

country's constitution in modern Earth society. For the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica, there was nothing more important than the rights of the people. The basic laws were the most substantial way of showing that the country existed for the sake of the people, so the congress members were currently creating them with fervor.

"Yes, that would be correct—the importance of the basic laws should definitely be emphasized. However, I agree with you in that other laws should be prepared concurrently to the basic laws. If a law turns out to be a problem later, you can just revise the basic law."

Fundamental laws had to establish in abstract terms the ideals of how the country should use its power, how the country existed for the people, how the people were guaranteed their rights and freedoms, and how the country would never infringe upon those rights. They would become the supreme laws of the nation, prioritized above everything else.

However, postponing the creation of other laws to realize the ideals of fundamental laws was pointless if it just made the people's lives harder in the meantime. It wouldn't make sense to prioritize one by completely neglecting the other—they both existed for the common purpose of making lives better, after all.

"I see... What matters more is that we, the people, are making the rules. As long as we guarantee that the country exercises its power under the control of the people, we should be able to make other laws before the basic laws."

"That's what I believe, yes. Without proper legislation, the people involved in conflicts and those conducting trials will lack clear legal basis for judgments. The matter of whether the country is using its power under the control of the people will be far from their minds. It seems that the congress is making a vote on every issue that arises right now, but..."

They wouldn't be able to deal with every problem in the country with such a method.

"I understand. I'll mention it to the congress. However, there are some members who are strongly against the use of laws created by the noble class, and they prefer to examine each law as a congress... Hmm. Is there any good way of preparing the other laws in a speedy fashion?"

"There may be feelings of aversion towards the laws of the monarchy, but they would make the best starting point for discussion. They may not be laws

made with the benefit of the people in mind, but there's much to learn from them. There are also many logical regulations that don't involve the noble class. If you remove all the exceptions created for the noble class, the old laws of the monarchy should be worth reviewing post-revolution."

It would require some work to split the laws that benefited nobles from proper regulations, but it would be better than creating new laws from scratch.

"Hmm. Most of the documents on the kingdom's laws were stored within the destroyed castle. There are some that have been retrieved from noble residences, but there aren't many."

"The laws used in minor kingdoms are usually copies of those used in major kingdoms, so you could just ask to see the laws of another nation..."

"We have no ties to other nations in our current state..." Andrei frowned. Even if they wanted to rely on another nation, their neighbors were all subjects of the Proxia Empire. They all feared backlash from the empire, so there was little chance of any of them cooperating.

"In that case, it may be better to ask a jurist, former official, or merchant familiar with the old laws if they possess a copy. If you still can't find a copy after that, you'll have to rely on your memory to rewrite them... Jurists tend to have specialized knowledge, so you'd preferably get someone from each area of expertise."

Each and every line of the law was written with a certain situation in mind. Trying to write new laws from scratch without any understanding was impossible. In order to create them, they needed the assistance of well-educated scholars or officials that used the laws. The next best option after them would be wealthy merchants that traded under a wide range of laws.

However, under the monarchy, only the noble class could become officials and scholars. There were no powerful merchants in a minor nation of this size either.

I doubt there were multiple jurists for every specialty before the revolution, so now that the noble class has been purged by the revolution...

It would probably be extremely difficult to gather the personnel needed. This country was suffering from a severe lack of capable people—that was the impression Liselotte had.

"..." Andrei probably didn't have anyone in mind either. He frowned and fell silent in thought.

Legislation doesn't seem to be the only problem they're having.

Liselotte had only looked around the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica for a few days, but she had noticed a lot in that time. The pride the people had in knowing they had won over the monarchy. The sense of fulfillment they had in knowing that their nation existed for them. The peace of mind and trust they had in knowing that the nation was being represented by their own comrades and not unfamiliar royalty. The vigor of the people living in the city was being supported by such factors. The upper ranks of the country were also overflowing with passion in pursuit of the ideal nation. However...

This country is lacking in everything.

There was no knowledge. No technology. No experience. No resources. No industries other than agriculture. That's why they couldn't fully establish the organizations and systems required for the nation to function.

There was no one in their congress that had any familiarity with politics. None of them were from the former noble class; the congress members were all commoners with no connection to politics, coming from origins like farming, construction, shoemaking, smithing, and trading.

While they had gathered a wide range of people from the commoner class, the way they were left to make political decisions on their own was quite concerning. They probably didn't even understand the state of international politics.

In reality, the current congress was inadequate for developing laws, and the administration was in danger of becoming completely dysfunctional because of it. The constant postponement of individual legislation and any specific definitions also amplified the issue.

Because of that, the state of the country's authority was vague and unclear. As Liselotte had described, the congress currently met for every decision that had to be made, and the nation had too many problems to solve in such a way.

After all their efforts in creating a government with a congress for legislation, a nominated leader of the state, and a democratic control of the authority...

They're being shaken by the system. I observed one of their congress meetings, and the members seem to find enjoyment in arguing over things, like they're drunk on it...

They were failing to use that system. In particular, the main legislative

body—the congress—was the root of democracy. The reason why the legislative and executive power that the monarchy held was split into the new system was so that executive power could be democratically controlled through a congress.

If there was no democratic control over the congress as an administrative body, they would be able to use their power just like the previous monarchy.

If they don't solve those issues first, this country will fall apart in the very near future...

Frankly speaking, the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica was only successfully established because the nation was small, their activities were limited, and they had nothing of interest to foreign nations.

Because of that, they were barely managing to exist as a country—and were simply lucky. If a foreign nation were to attack now, the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica would not be able to win. It was hard to tell how they had even succeeded in the revolution, actually.

Perhaps Saint Erica wasn't being given enough credit in that sense. The military strength of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica changed greatly depending on her existence. That was Liselotte's analysis, which was greatly influenced by seeing the ruins of the destroyed castle.

The effect Saint Erica had on the morale of the people was immense as well. It was because of her that the revolution happened, and succeeded.

However, for better or for worse, Saint Erica's existence had influenced this country too much. The people may have gone along with the revolution, but the one who made it succeed was Saint Erica alone.

The power of the Divine Arms won the revolution, establishing the country at a rapid speed.

Could the issues in this country be caused by the omission of most of the processes of a revolution? They've experienced consecutive successes, which is why the people are so confident in themselves...

Erica had supposedly traveled the country to start the revolution, preaching before the public in every region governed by nobility.

In doing so, she'd planted the image of authority figures as evil in the minds of the people, then executed them. This had roused the people of those regions, and by doing so, she'd skipped decades' worth of how the process would happen on Earth. Instead of ten to one hundred years of wealthy intellectuals sharing their knowledge and awareness of human rights, Erica

had planted those thoughts straight into the heads of the people through a clear reality.

Then, after putting together a makeshift democracy system and being appointed as the first representative of the nation, the saint goes off on a journey? What is she trying to accomplish? It looks like she's just trying to start a war with every person of royal and noble blood she can.

She should have known that abducting Liselotte would result in a serious international issue with the Galarc Kingdom. Yet, that was exactly what she did.

It was hard to imagine that she wanted to make an enemy of every kingdom and empire in Strahl, yet her actions were indiscriminate enough to imply exactly that. Even she should know that starting needless wars would just result in the deaths of the weak she was trying to save...

I don't get it. Is Erica's goal really to bring salvation to the weak? She said she was creating a country for the people, by the people, in order to save the weak, but...

Liselotte could only see the saint as a dangerous person. Well, there was no doubt she was dangerous to begin with, but her methods of accomplishing her goals were fatally flawed.

At the same time, she gave these people permission to interact with me while she was away, revealing the weakness of this country directly to me...

Liselotte had been lost deep in her thoughts until now, but she suddenly looked up and realized Andrei was looking at her with a heated gaze.

"Umm... Is something the matter?"

"No, I was just thinking about why Saint Erica brought you to our country. She truly understands what our country needs the most—that is to say, people like you."

"O-Oh. Is that so..." Liselotte murmured awkwardly.

"Liselotte, I need you." Andrei suddenly uttered what sounded like a courtship line.

"I've already rejected that offer many times already." Liselotte shook her head with a sigh. Indeed, she had experienced this conversation with Andrei multiple times since he began frequenting her room.

"But you're needed here!" Andrei didn't back down and protested firmly.

"I'm afraid I cannot help."

Knowing he would only get more persistent from here, Liselotte stated her

thoughts gently but clearly. Andrei was easily swayed by his emotions, so she knew he wasn't the type to understand with just a gentle answer.

"Mr. Andrei, your words are turning into a confession of love again," Natalia, the girl accompanying them as a guard, commented with a grin. She didn't care for the political talk, nearly dozing off in her chair in the corner of the room, but the change in topic had brought her back to attention.

"Oh, no! That isn't my intention..." Andrei blushed, reacting like an innocent young man.

"Hmm, is that so?" Natalia continued to grin wickedly.

"Wh-What's that look for, Natalia?"

"Oh, nothing... Come to think of it, I heard a rumor yesterday. The straitlaced Saint Erica devotee, Mr. Andrei, is spending every day with a young and beautiful unmarried woman... Perhaps spring has finally come for him?"

"I-I'm not...! I'm purely after Liselotte's cooperation for the sake of our country!" Andrei denied in shock.

"Oh? I didn't say anything about the woman being Liselotte, did I? In fact, I spend all day guarding you too, don't I?" Natalia was one step ahead of him.

"N-Natalia...! I-I'm so sorry about this, Liselotte."

"Ahaha. It's fine..." Liselotte glossed over things with a sociable smile.

Andrei wasn't a bad person. His intense belief in Saint Erica blinded him at times, but he had a good personality at heart. Many people would find him an honest and hardworking man. He was still lacking experience as a politician, but he was very willing to learn, and absorbed the information he was given rapidly.

However, Liselotte was abducted and brought here against her will. She hadn't forgotten that—and she wasn't about to cooperate with the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica just because the upper ranks and its citizens weren't bad people.

As a noble of the Galarc Kingdom, Liselotte had a duty to gather information about this country. That's why she cooperated to a level where the other side would lower their guard and trust her enough to give her beneficial information. In order to do that, she gave them some useful advice, but it wouldn't amount to much with their overwhelming lack of personnel...

In reality, she seemed to have gained quite a lot of trust from the two of

them in these last several days. For example, Andrei's guard, Natalia, who was a former adventurer. After listening to their conversations every day, she started to relax, even cutting in to put a stop to Andrei's ranting at times. She was nineteen years old, and while she had acted rather crabbily towards Liselotte for being a noblewoman in the beginning, her personality was actually rather friendly.

But I shouldn't get too close to her. These people are from a potential enemy nation. I cannot empathize with them too much.

Winning the other side's trust while keeping her own intentions at a distance was something Liselotte had to do, naturally, as a noblewoman and merchant. And the other side was trying to do the same to her. Despite that, she felt like she was deceiving them. When she considered the future turbulence awaiting the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica, she couldn't help but feel ashamed.

Perhaps it was because she knew that even if she pointed out the issues that would soon arise, no easy solution existed for them.

Or perhaps she had learned too much about these two. They were too honest to deal with a merchant like Liselotte.

If they had met somewhere else, they may have become friends with her like Haruto and Miharu were. Perhaps it was because she had started thinking of these two in the same way.

How would this country look to Haruto's eyes, as someone who was also reborn into this world?

Suddenly, that question popped into Liselotte's mind. She didn't consider her own opinions to be absolute, and it was possible the impression she received of this country was off the mark. She wondered what Rio would think, as someone born in this world with the memories of growing up in another democratic world.

Sir Haruto, huh...

At the thought of Rio, a somewhat saddened, somewhat uneasy, conflicted look appeared on Liselotte's face as she watched the exchange between Natalia and Andrei.

"E-Enough teasing, Natalia. Liselotte is a noblewoman, so I'm sure she has a much more worthy fiancé than me," Andrei said suddenly, bringing up the topic in order to hide his embarrassment. But by doing so, he had touched upon a rather delicate topic. If Liselotte answered that she did have a fiancé,

things would only get awkward for Andrei and Natalia, who were keeping her captive.

"Well, I suppose that makes sense... Do you?" Natalia asked nervously.

"No, I don't have a fiancé." Liselotte shook her head with a forced smile.

"Hmm. What about a crush?"

"I don't...really..." She faltered, unable to deny it immediately. There was someone who immediately came to mind, but she wasn't sure whether her feelings were romantic or not.

Ah, it looks like she does. Natalia's instincts immediately tipped her off.

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“Ahem... Anyways, it truly is difficult, isn’t it? The task of creating a country for the people, by the people. Wouldn’t you agree, Liselotte?” It seemed like such romance talk was still too early for Andrei, who cleared his throat and changed the topic in embarrassment.

“That’s only to be expected... If the ways of the monarchy were wrong, then the new nation has to show the people what the right way is. That burden falls upon you and the other politicians,” Liselotte responded with a slightly saddened smile, thinking about someone who wasn’t there at the moment.

“It’s truly a big responsibility. I hope Saint Erica returns soon—she should be expected back around this time, but...” Feeling the weight of the nation on his shoulders, Andrei smiled wryly. Erica would return to the country the next day.

◇ ◇ ◇

The next afternoon, First Head of State Erica of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica returned.

“Oh, how long it has been. We have missed you so much, Saint Erica! Thank goodness you have returned safely...”

As the prime minister, Andrei worked in the same official residence as Erica. As soon as he heard Erica had returned, he hurried to her office, rejoicing over her return from the bottom of his heart as she remained seated in her chair.

“It’s good to see you full of energy, Andrei. I’m also glad to be back. Did anything major happen while I was gone?” Erica smiled brightly as she sought an update on the recent state of things.

“Let’s see... There were no major problems. The city repairs are ongoing, and the people are in high spirits. The congress is also actively discussing how to bring a better future to the people.”

“Why, that sounds lovely. I knew I could count on you, Andrei,” Erica immediately said in praise.

“N-Not at all. Everyone did their best to protect the country while you were away. It was nothing of my own doing.”

“You did your best too, no? That was what came to my mind the moment you stepped into the room. Ah, what a good expression, I thought.”

“R-Really? Such words are wasted on me.” Andrei bowed his head shyly.

“It may be a bit late to say this, but I left this country because I wanted you and the other congress members to gain experience. Of course, I had no doubt everyone would be able to handle it, but hearing your words just now made me very pleased.”

“You thought that far into it...”

“Hehe.” Erica grinned at Andrei’s emotional reaction.

“O-Oh, that’s right. Speaking of changes, Liselotte is truly a wonderful person. As expected of Saint Erica to see promise in her.” Andrei’s voice was high-pitched with embarrassment as he spoke about Liselotte.

“Right? She’s a bright and clever girl. Despite being the daughter of a leading noble, she thinks of the people and governs them well.”

“Yes, I was surprised by the depth of her views. I had more to learn from her than the other way around.”

“The Holy Democratic Republic of Erica needs more people like her right now.”

“Yes. I keenly felt our shortage of personnel by talking to her. That’s why we must bring her into our country. That’s what you intended, right?”

“Andrei...” Erica didn’t speak any words of confirmation or denial, instead calling Andrei’s name as though she was touched.

“She can definitely be swayed. I’m sure she will agree with our thoughts soon.”

“What does she think about how she was restrained and forcefully brought to this country?”

“As per the orders Natalia and the others received, I told her the first time I showed her around the capital that there was a slight misunderstanding, and to wait until you returned to discuss the details. She hasn’t brought up the topic since then... But unfortunately, I don’t think she feels very happy about it.” Andrei frowned a little. Ever since he’d started frequenting Liselotte’s room, he’d started to understand her nature more. She was born as a high-ranked noble, yet she interacted with commoners like them on equal standing.

If such a person was so enraged, perhaps there was validity behind her reasoning? Andrei continued following Erica’s orders out of his near-religious devotion to her, but he was beginning to wonder if he should lend an ear to Liselotte’s reasoning as well.

“I see... I’ve given you a difficult role to bear, Andrei. Forgive me.” Erica

saw through the subtleties in Andrei's expression and apologized with a bitter smile.

"N-No, not at all. It is my duty as prime minister to support you, Saint Erica. I know that this is expected of someone in a political position." Andrei shook his head humbly.

"You really are an earnest worker. But I sometimes worry you're holding in all your emotions."

"I am unworthy of such consideration."

"..." Erica stared with a loving gaze at Andrei as he humbled himself, then suddenly stood up. She walked up to him and stroked his cheek gently.

"Uh... S-Saint Erica?" Andrei froze.

"If anything is bothering you, tell me all about it." She giggled.

"R-Right! Gladly!" Andrei nodded enthusiastically.

"Now, it's time to pay Liselotte a visit. Andrei, gather all the congress members that are available right now. As soon as they're ready, bring Liselotte to the congress office."

"I understand." Andrei nodded readily, then hurried out of the room with brisk footsteps.

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An hour later, Liselotte was shown out of the room she was confined in by Natalia, who led her to the meeting room. Waiting inside the office were Erica, Andrei, and dozens of other congress members from the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica.

Liselotte hadn't heard that Erica had returned, so she walked in assuming she was observing another congress meeting. When she spotted Erica standing on the platform, her eyes widened. Natalia nudged her to stand before the platform.

"Hello, Liselotte."

It wasn't Sakuraba Erika who greeted her, but the saint. She had a sociable attitude, as though she had never attacked Liselotte in Amande.

"..." Liselotte didn't respond. She furrowed her brows in a glare, expressing her anger. Even the normally good-natured Liselotte could be enraged.

That was how awful this saint had been to her.

She had behaved maturely before Andrei and Natalia because there was no point in being hostile to them, but she didn't have to hold back before Erica.

"Oh my, dear Liselotte. You'll get wrinkles like that. It'd be a waste of such a cute face, wouldn't you say?"

Liselotte's expression wasn't severe enough to form wrinkles, but Erica feigned ignorance and pointed it out anyway. The congress room wasn't that big, so her voice carried clearly even at a normal speaking volume.

"I'm still fifteen years old, so I don't need your concern."

"Oh, really? You don't look fifteen at all..." Considering her knowledge of Liselotte's previous life as Rikka, she was probably being sarcastic.

"I couldn't recognize you either, Ms. Sakuraba. The last time I saw you in Amande, you had the face of a savage beast."

Liselotte returned the favor by purposefully calling Erica by her last name. Andrei and Natalia, who were standing behind Erica, cocked their heads in confusion, unaware of Erica's last name.

"Oh my, what are you talking about?" Erica maintained her feigned ignorance.

"Are you suffering from memory loss?"

"I truly don't remember. It's been a long and eventful journey, so the trifling matters that occur along the way get forgotten..."

"Trifling matters, you say? I see, your exhausting duties must have accelerated your aging. Do take care of your health." Liselotte looked at Erica's face as though she were genuinely concerned.

"Why, thank you for your concern. Hahaha."

Erica and Liselotte smiled gently while throwing knife-sharp words at each other. Andrei, Natalia, and the others in the room watched their exchange in silence.

"Natalia, does the air feel rather hostile to you...?"

"It's not just the air that's hostile right now. An intelligent woman is speaking sarcastically with a smile—you better carve this moment into your intuition."

Standing behind Erica, Andrei sensed the serious atmosphere in the room and turned to question Natalia about it. Natalia answered in a cold sweat.

"Now then, could you explain this situation and why I was kidnapped to the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica? I, Liselotte Cretia of the Galarc

Kingdom, demand to be returned immediately."

She had waited long enough for Erica's return. With no patience left for mind games, Liselotte stated her position clearly.

"Unfortunately, you cannot be returned to the Galarc Kingdom. You have learned of our national secret."

"That you are a hero, you mean?"

"That's right," Erica agreed without hesitation.

"You sure admitted it easily for a national secret. Not even Prime Minister Andrei knew the truth." Liselotte looked at Andrei.

"Is that true, Saint Erica?" Andrei asked with a hopeful look.

"Now that it's out in the open, I can only accept it. It's true, Andrei. I am apparently a hero," Erica answered. The room buzzed with noise.

"Quiet, everyone. Let me speak to Liselotte," Erica said.

"If you're willing to admit it that easily, then I don't believe there was a need to kidnap me. Are you saying you wouldn't have abducted me if I hadn't asked if you were the hero in Amande?"

"There's no point in discussing hypotheticals. You learned of an important secret, so I simply thought to bring a souvenir of my own back with me."

"Is the fact that you're the hero an important secret?"

"Someone as bright as you should know the value of information. Haven't you come to a conclusion for that reason already?"

"Only that you can use it to your advantage by keeping it a secret until the right moment. But I want to hear the answer from you, considering all the trouble I've gone through because of it."

"That I cannot do. I won't be giving you answers." Erica declined answering with a bright grin.

"Is it related to how you're a prophet as well? The prophecy you saw should have appeared in your dreams shortly after the hero summoning, but..." Liselotte used key words that would draw out a reaction and watched Erica's face for more information.

"Oh, you seem rather knowledgeable about it."

"I've met the other five heroes before. As far as I know, they were taught how to use their Divine Arms in their dreams."

"Yes, that would be correct. I saw that dream shortly after I was summoned as well."

"..." Liselotte stared at the way Erica readily nodded.

"What is it?" Erica looked puzzled.

"Was the prophecy from that dream?"

"Who knows? If you join our country, perhaps I could share that information with you..."

"I see. No thank you, then." Liselotte backed down immediately.

"What a shame. Ah, speaking of heroes, I met the hero girl from Galarc. She had a determined spirit. There was another quiet Japanese girl with her, but was she a hero as well? I believe her name was Miharu," Erica said, as though it suddenly came to her mind.

Miharu was there...? Does that mean Sir Haruto was present as well?

Liselotte's eyes widened faintly, wondering if he had returned from his trip.

"But there was a gray-haired boy who seemed stronger than her there. Could he be the hero instead? His physical body enhancement was on par with mine."

It turned out Erica had met with someone resembling Haruto.

"Who knows? If information about the heroes is a national secret as you say, then I cannot answer. I don't want to indiscriminately spread personal information about others either."

"Hmph. You say that, but you forced my information out of me." Erica puffed up her cheeks, sulking.

"Forced? That's a bit misleading. We both agreed to answer each other's questions, and I followed those rules too."

"What about all the questions I know you must have asked Andrei while I was away? You say you don't want to spread personal information, but you're fine with prying into other people's lives? Isn't that a bit unfair? But I guess that's the typical way of the noble class."

"Indiscriminately, I said. It depends on who I'm talking to, and what about. A matter of trust. And you were the one who ordered Andrei to teach me about the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica yourself, no? It's absurd to expect the head of state not to come up in such discussions."

"You have such an eloquent way with words. And a dauntless attitude. It's why you don't appear fifteen, but it's also the type of personality highly sought after from politicians. Everyone should learn from you." Erica giggled in amusement, addressing the room at large.

“Haha...”

Andrei and Natalia had strained smiles behind Erica. Liselotte had never shown her noble attitude in front of the two of them.

Part of the reason was because Andrei had said to her at their first meeting that he wouldn’t make any political decisions as a proxy for Erica, but Liselotte had also wanted to imply that she never saw him as a politician.

“That aside, the gray-haired boy. Could he be in that kind of relationship with you?”

“You sure change the subject quickly. I doubt it’s an appropriate topic for a place like this, but what kind of relationship do you mean?” Liselotte looked exasperated at the sudden change in topic.

“Hmm... I wouldn’t call you lovers, but you said you were interested in someone, no? I was just wondering if he could be that person. He seemed to be surrounded by many lovely women who adored him,” Erica said teasingly, but Liselotte’s response was blunt.

“I have no reason to answer you.”

“If you refuse to answer every one of my questions, I won’t answer any of yours. I’m sure you have lots to ask me as well.”

“I don’t mind if you’re selective over your answers, so please ask something more worthwhile. And I’ve never believed in all your words to begin with.”

“It seems I really am hated after all,” Erica said, expressing a disappointed mood that the whole room could pick up on.

“I understand. Then let’s get to the point—though I’m not sure what to discuss first. If there’s anything you wish to ask, feel free to ask it,” Erica said in compromise, making a display of how generous she was.

She sure excels at making herself look good...

By doing something that showed the difference between herself and the other party, she could bring down their image. It was a cunning but clever trick. The side being insulted would not be amused and would be more prone to snapping; it was clear that Erica was used to inciting others. However, Liselotte wasn’t so easily provoked into becoming angry.

“If you met the three of them, does that mean you went to the Galarc Castle?” If Erica was willing to give answers, then she wouldn’t hold back her questions.

“Yes, I figured I had to address the matter of your abduction. I spoke to

the Galarc King as well."

"With His Majesty...?"

"The Galarc Kingdom is no good. I warned them to abandon the monarchy, but the evil king is obsessed with his power. He wouldn't heed my words at all and threatened me with his military power instead," Erica sighed sadly.

"That doesn't sound like the king that I know," Liselotte said, indirectly suggesting Erica was lying.

"But that is the impression I received from him."

"..."

"Oh yes, your strong attendant was also there."

"I see. So Aria's safe." Liselotte had been abducted immediately after Erica sent a powerful attack at Aria, kicking up a cloud of dust and blocking her view, so she hadn't been able to see what happened. Knowing that Aria was still alive was enough to fill her with relief.

"She seemed very lively and ready to attack me at any moment. Perhaps our different impressions of the king are caused by her making a misleading testimony? She seemed to be extremely hostile towards me."

"That's only to be expected after what you did in Amande. But Aria would never give a testimony that twisted the truth," Liselotte stated clearly.

"You seem to trust her a lot. Just like how I trust the people of this country, including the people here right now." Erica turned her head slightly, looking at the people gathered in the room with a gentle smile. Everyone beamed back at her happily.

"Aria and I have gone through a lot together. Enough to form a foundation of trust."

It was hard to imagine Erica had any trust accumulated—if anything, she seemed like the type to discard the subjects of her human relationships after gaining their trust. There was nothing to believe about a person like that who looked down on Aria. That's what Liselotte was implying with her words.

"I see, so you treasure those experiences. That must be what we're lacking with you. We'd like you to join us at this very moment, but it seems impossible to ask you to trust and assist us without those experiences," Erica said.

"Naturally."

Yes, that was a given. That was the last thing Liselotte wanted to hear

from her, but she kept her sarcasm limited to a single word of agreement.

"Andrei and Natalia have been very good to you, no? They truly believe in making a country for the sake of the people. Shouldn't you have accumulated some experiences with them while I was gone?"

"Yes, I suppose... More than with you, at least."

Liselotte glanced at Andrei and Natalia and nodded.

"In that case, why don't you speak your mind in front of the two of them?"

"Do you wish for me to repeat what I said in Amande here? No matter how many times you ask, my answer won't change. And I've discussed many things with Andrei during your absence."

"Even then, I want you to express yourself in front of everyone here. As the daughter of a great lord, born and raised in a major kingdom, please tell us how you see the rule of the monarchy. As a member of the noble class with actually respectable values, what is your perspective? I've received a brief report on what was discussed while waiting in this room, and it seems like you gave a lot of advice on our administration system. Thank you for that."

"I didn't say anything of that much importance."

"Not at all. I found the topic of the conflict in rights a very fascinating topic. It is a problem sure to arise between the people in the future of this country, one which will strongly influence how our administration system can bloom as a democracy. That's why I'd like to hold a discussion over that topic today," Erica said, leading the meeting with the aura of a teacher.

She said she was a lecturer at a university, if I recall. No wonder she seems so familiar with this kind of thing... Liselotte recalled what she'd heard from her in Amande.

"I'm fine with that, but may I ask one thing first?" she asked, adding a condition before participating in Erica's discussion.

"Yes?"

"Judging by the way you're leading the discussion, I believe you must have realized the latent issues this country is carrying already."

Liselotte asked to confirm if Erica was already aware of the problems—and had left them alone knowingly.

"Hehehe. How observant of you. Indeed, I've noticed what the direction this country is heading towards is and what issues will arise already."

“R-Really?! Why didn’t you...” Andrei looked shocked behind her. The congress members in the room stirred quietly.

“It’s easy for me to order you to make countermeasures, but I cannot be giving you orders for everything. I want everyone to gain experience, not knowledge. You already have unconditional belief in everything I say. Merely following orders isn’t enough for you to grow.” Erica turned around and smiled gracefully at Andrei, then looked around at the faces of the congress members.

“You truly predicted everything,” he murmured.

“Is that why you made them show me the country in your absence? So that I could see through the issues and tell them to Andrei? Since your people are less likely to believe me as an outsider.”

“Hehe. You truly have superb observational skills. I was sure you would notice this country’s problems. Whether you would actually pass them on to Andrei or not was a fifty-fifty chance in my mind, though.”

“...” Liselotte found Erica’s gloating smile rather unpleasant and eerie. She couldn’t tell at what point Erica had had everything planned, how far her plan extended, or why she would do such a thing.

Although she stated her various intentions, Liselotte couldn’t help but feel like those statements were misleading as well. However, she had no proof. Erica hid everything too well.

“If you’re done with your question, let’s move on to the main discussion. For some time now, I have been preaching to the people of the flaws of human governance. Human rulers make laws convenient for themselves, and those laws change every time the ruler changes. It’s a highly unstable system.”

“Is that why you want to create a society where the laws rule over people equally? So that people can be judged as equals.”

“As expected of you. You understand that what I want is universal laws to bring justice and salvation to the weak, don’t you? That’s why humans cannot create the rules. They’re different things. Humans cannot create laws of a higher order than other humans, so those laws are not absolute. For example, it would be out of the question to accept a law that approves of the noble class and social status system. It’s a bit of a simplification, but that’s the gist of it...”

In Earth terms, this way of thinking was called the rule of law. It was

originally a principle developed from the foundations of Anglo-American law, but they were currently in a world with vastly different cultural foundations. It was hard to say if such ideas would have ever budded here of their own accord. As an aside, there was a similarly named rule of law in this world with different principles that was developed as a continental law.

If the rule of law from modern Earth was to spread in this world—for example, if Japan's constitution were to be applied here—the privileges of the current royalty and nobility would immediately become negated. Either their statuses would be entirely abolished, or they would remain in name with no real privileges left.

However, forcefully spreading that idea would inevitably result in fierce rebellion from royalty and nobles unwilling to part with their vested interests.

"Don't you think it's a wonderful way of thinking?" Erica turned to question Liselotte, who was seated across from her, with a cheerful expression. Liselotte knew she was being tested as a member of the noble class.

"I believe I said something similar in Amande, but it's unjust for the noble class to oppress the lower class without reason, and humans have no right to discriminate. This is my personal opinion," she replied firmly.

"You truly have splendid values. If all royals and nobles were like you, the world would have remained a kind place to live in for a long time. However, not everyone thinks like you. Humans are foolish creatures. There are those who want to discriminate. Those who feel a sense of superiority and relief by looking down on others. As long as those types of people exist in this world, the weak will always be subject to the whims of those in control. Everyone here has experienced this firsthand."

In response to Erica's statement, the congress members all spoke up in agreement.

Before anyone knew it, the atmosphere of the room had turned Erica into the representative of the people, and Liselotte into the representative of all royals and nobles.

This was no discussion.

It was a trial. Everyone in the room besides Liselotte had experienced hardship in their lives because of the noble class, and they all agreed with Erica's thoughts.

Liselotte had had a faint idea of what would happen from the moment she

stepped into the room and saw Erica's face, but she also knew the moment she abandoned the discussion, she would be fully recognized as the villain. She knew she had no chance of winning, but she had no choice but to justify herself through the discussion.

"I believe I can understand the reason why everyone finds you and your ideas so wonderful, Saint Erica," she said, looking around the room.

"What about yourself, Liselotte? Do you not agree that my ideas are wonderful?"

"On a personal level, I can empathize with them to a great extent."

"What a noble-like response. You won't agree that they're wonderful. It almost sounds like you harbor ill feelings about it..."

"I merely thought that guided yes or no questions wouldn't be enough to express my thoughts."

"And as a result, I sensed there were ill feelings in your response. What's wrong with that? Do you disagree with the idea of guiding people to the correct path through a higher-order law, a truth of the world that realizes the justice of bringing salvation to the weak?"

"It's not wrong... I just think that rapidly promoting such an idea can result in chaos."

"Oh? How so?"

"You'll be making an enemy of every noble who wants to maintain their interests. Such a thing will result in war."

"The noble class are the ones in the wrong, no? If the noble class won't resolve the injustice themselves, then the oppressed people must rise in revolution to correct them..."

"It's not only figures of power who live in a kingdom. There are many people in a country, and it's because of those people that the country can flourish. I understand that if the people wish for correction, then a revolution is inevitable and justified. However, forcing a revolution when the system of the kingdom is solid and stable could result in a tragedy."

"Are you that afraid of confronting other nobles?" Erica taunted.

"I am afraid. For example, let's say I led the people of Amande in a revolution against the kingdom. All the nobles of the nation would direct their military forces at me in retaliation. But would I be the only one at risk? Won't the people living in my territory get killed along the way? How do you think the people would see such a situation? I'd be criticized for starting a

pointless war with no chance of victory," Liselotte said without hesitation.

"So you're telling me to wait until the passing of time wears down the governing system of the noble class? That I should ignore the people out there suffering right this moment?"

"I don't want those people to be ignored... But having a just reason doesn't make it okay to put them on a sinking ship."

Liselotte frowned bitterly. First and foremost, the questions Erica was demanding answers for weren't matters an individual could resolve alone. They were difficult problems that a forced solution could ruin any hope of solving, dragging others into the destruction.

"So you'd abandon the resolution of the problem. In that case, you should discard your noble status. If you won't do that, it means you want to selfishly cling to your status in order to continue living comfortably as a noble. You think that if you say words to pander to the people, you won't be hated by them," Erica said, pointing at Liselotte and criticizing her. It was a terrible way of one-sidedly labeling her.

However, most of the congress members present sided with Erica, who stood on the side of the victims—the people. Many voices echoed in agreement, criticizing Liselotte, who stood on the side of the perpetrators.

They believed that if she truly thought of the people, she would be willing to throw away her status that allowed her a comfortable life.

"I am a noble of the Galarc Kingdom. As the governor of Amande, I have to be responsible for the people living there. If I abandon that position, the lives of the people in Amande will become unstable. Wouldn't that be irresponsible?"

In the end, Liselotte didn't state that she would discard her noble status. While her expression stiffened involuntarily, she stated her opinion without fear. In response, the participating congress members expressed their disappointment and rage. Some voices shouted, "Don't make excuses!" and others echoed them in agreement. They had no idea how much Liselotte was adored by the people of Amande.

"I know that Amande is a wonderful city. Indeed, without you, the lives of the people there would be of a much lesser quality." Contrary to everyone's expectations, Erica readily praised Liselotte's governing of Amande.

"In that case, please send me back to Amande. I cannot fulfill my duty as governor in my present location. By abducting me from my kingdom, you

have made the lives of the people of Amande unstable. Am I wrong?"

"Indeed, that could be one way of looking at it. But how about seeing it this way? The reason why Amande has been governed well until now is because Liselotte Cretia is a good noble. But what if the next noble that governs Amande is a tyrant? There must be many who live in fear of that."

"That's exactly why you should send me back immediately..."

"Don't you think that you should take measures to ensure that the people of Amande can live safely, even without the presence of Liselotte Cretia? So that the people won't be endangered no matter who takes over Amande after you."

"What are you trying to say?"

Liselotte seemed to have sensed something from that response, as she asked her question with a fed-up look.

"In other words, despite your claims of responsibility over the people of Amande, you haven't been fulfilling that duty. You may be doing well in the present, but you haven't given any thought to the next generations. It's the same as disregarding the entire future of the city. Would anyone here wish to live under such a governor?" Erica said, inviting the listening congress members to respond.

"No!"

"A leader has to think about the future!"

"That's right, that's right!" they said, one after another.

We're going around in circles. This saint is saying to make the city democratic so that the people's lives won't sink into depravity. Even though she knows that doing so will make an enemy of every royal and noble in the kingdom, contradicting her own point. But even if I explain that, no one here will listen.

The rules that Liselotte could set for Amande were ranked below the higher-order national laws and territory laws. Thus, as a governor, there was no point in making rules that went against the national and territory laws. On top of that, it was possible for new governors to repeal the rules set by previous governors.

Even if a new system was introduced to keep the rule ongoing after a change in governor, it would require special permission from the territory lord and king, and even that permission could be reversed if a new lord and king came into power. In which case, it would ultimately require a revolution

to rebuild society and implement the rule of law.

This is probably as far as Saint Erica wants this discussion to go.

Since she wasn't able to shift the destination of their talk, it was Liselotte's defeat. She knew she had a slim chance of victory to begin with, and that was exactly what happened.

Now that things had come to this, there was no point in repeating herself in this discussion. The only thing to do was to move on to the next stage herself.

"I believe we've drifted rather far from the main point of the discussion. Is that okay? I recall the topic to be about the conflict of rights and how to make democracy succeed in this country, but the conversation was mostly similar to what we exchanged in Amande," Liselotte asked Erica with a shrug.

There were voices who opposed this. Shouts of "Don't change the topic," "You're running away," and "Accept your defeat graciously" sounded out, but Liselotte didn't appear bothered by them.

"I believe we've given the topic plenty of debate. Today, our respective rights to freedom of speech were presented to each other. We put into practice the collision of rights."

"That just sounds like sophistry..."

"No, the biggest difference from our conversation in Amande is the members of congress gathered here to decide on this country's future. That, and I believe our discussion was only of such a high degree because it was made by you and me. If either one of us had been replaced by someone else, the talk wouldn't have gotten this heated. There's great meaning in allowing those here today to hear this conversation. Their thoughts after hearing the discussion will surely influence the future of this country that they will create. I am certain of this." Erica looked around the room with a derisive sneer.

"Well then, may I assume you've achieved your goal in calling me here?"

"No, there's one last thing... Liselotte. Will you lend me your strength? Let us bring salvation to the weak together. If you and I join hands, our peaceful reign will last far longer than that in Amande."

"That sounds like a rather dangerous statement. Are you telling me to betray my country?" Liselotte frowned. Erica's statement just now sounded like she was planning a revolution in Galarc, and wanted assistance.

"How you interpret it is up to you. But as a hero, I can make it happen.

I'm capable of it. That's why I'm making this proposal."

"There are five other heroes, you know? They've all been confirmed to be affiliated with a kingdom. Do you plan on making enemies of all five of them?"

"That won't be a problem. I won't lose to any hero that's been living a warm and sheltered life provided by their country. As long as I stand on the front line as the Saint and a hero, the people will not know defeat."

"That's quite the confidence you have..."

"Yes. That is why I am requesting your assistance once again. You understand it perfectly well, don't you? That humans are foolish creatures. That is why we need intelligent people like you. Let's create our reality together." Erica smiled gently, offering her hand to Liselotte.

"I've never particularly thought of myself as smart. People can't be valued by their intelligence. Your so-called ideal government system doesn't measure people like that either, does it? That's why you consider people to be born equal." Liselotte did not accept Erica's hand.

"Yes, exactly."

"In that case, please stop this extortion. How does forcing me to obey you like this make you any different from the evil noble class that you detest so much?"

Likes, dislikes. People were free to express their opinions. They had the freedom to convey their thoughts to others. However, it was wrong to force those thoughts on someone else. People had the freedom not to be forced into things, after all.

When the conflict of rights happened without any respect for each other, imposition occurred. The act of forcing another into something was coercion. And when coercion went too far, it became controlling.

Of course, merely discussing one's opinions and ideas was fine, as it was the very essence of democracy. However, trying to bend the opinions and thoughts of someone you disagreed with, controlling them no matter what—that was the equivalent of a human ruling over another human. Wasn't that essentially the same abuse of power that they hated so much?

Liselotte stared at Erica in protest.

"Wh-What did she just say?!"

"How does insisting on the right thing make us the same as the noble class?!"

“We only act as a collective will! The consensus of the people is what is correct!”

“What slander!”

“Take back your words!”

“Wicked noblewoman who only cares for her own interests without fulfilling her duties!”

“She only cares about herself! That’s why she won’t discard her status!”

“A woman born in a blessed environment wouldn’t understand us!”

“All she does is take taxes from the people she should be protecting! This woman is a criminal!”

“She only knows how to ride her high horse! Repent!”

“This woman is a witch!”

“Convict her! She must be convicted by us!”

The congress members reddened in anger and yelled abusively at Liselotte unanimously. They tried to guilt her by calling her evil, to teach her the truth. They must have felt personally attacked by her point, as their reactions were excessively heated.

“...” Liselotte bit her lip sadly, but didn’t argue back.

“Quiet please, everyone.”

Erica clapped her hands together twice. Since it was her order, the congress members had no choice but to fall silent.

“This is a place of discussion. We should give Liselotte a proper chance to make her rebuttal. That being said, I doubt there’s anything we can do to fill the trench between us... Is there anything else you’d like to say, Liselotte?”

“I believe I’ve said everything I wanted to say. How you judge me for it is up to you,” she answered undauntedly.

“I see... Then that concludes today’s provisional congress meeting, I believe. You may all leave.” Erica prompted the congress members to exit. They glared at Liselotte with clenched fists for a few seconds, but then started walking out the door one by one.

“Andrei, Natalia. After everyone else has exited, please show Liselotte back to her room,” Erica ordered the two standing behind her.

“Okay...”

Andrei nodded, about to say something to Liselotte before biting his lips shut. Then, Erica approached Liselotte.

“That was a wonderful speech, Rikka. If you were one of my students, I’d give you full marks. Don’t worry. When the right time comes, I’ll return you safely to your kingdom,” she whispered into Liselotte’s ear, not as Saint Erica but as Sakuraba Erika. Perhaps it was because she showed her face as Sakuraba Erika, but Liselotte made the decision to ask about her deceased fiancé.

“Please let me ask one more question. I heard that you started down this path as a way of succeeding your late fiancé’s way of living. Are you truly continuing his legacy right now? Would he really agree that your actions are for the sake of the people?”

“What a silly question. How can I know, when I’ll never hear his voice again? I can only confirm that I started down this path after accepting his death.”

Erica had a conflicted look of sadness on her face. But that look only lasted for a brief moment before the saint’s mask went back up and she gave her reply.

“I...see...” Liselotte hung her head weakly. Meanwhile, the congress members had just finished leaving the room.

“Now, please show Liselotte back to her room.” Before Liselotte could

reply, Erica gave her orders to Andrei and Natalia. Thus, Liselotte was returned to her room.

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Chapter 5: Rescue

Roughly one hour before Liselotte was invited to the meeting room, Rio, Aria, and Aishia had arrived in the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica alongside Saint Erica's return. Rio was carrying Aria in his arms while overlooking the capital city below; they soared in the skies above the south side of Ericaburg just past noontime.

Rio and Aria were both wearing cloaks on top of their combat clothes. Rio's favorite black wyvern coat had been repaired in the spirit folk village, but walking around in it would attract too much attention, so he wasn't wearing it now.

Aishia, go after the saint to locate Liselotte. Contact me as soon as you find her. Plan A is to check where she's been confined, if it's possible to escape by using an invisibility art, and to rescue her right away if so. If it seems difficult to get away, we'll come up with a Plan B depending on her confinement conditions.

He had come up with a rough outline of the plan with Aria while they were moving, so once he came within range of communicating with Aishia, he gave her a short summary of what they had decided on.

Got it. The saint has descended in the heart of the city. She's going into a building. I'll contact you later.

Thank you. Aria and I will check the state of the city in the meantime.

Rio could see the saint's griffin descend in the noble district with his own eyes. He then ended his communication with Aishia.

"She's entered an official building. Aishia's going to follow her and check whether Liselotte is inside," he said to Aria in his arms.

"Okay. From what I can see from above, the entire city is under repair. It must be the aftermath of the revolution. The buildings past what looks like the noble district are all ruined, and there's nothing but a pile of rubble at the very back..."

They could see workers laboring away at the ruined city—a rather heartrending sight.

“Position-wise, that should be where the castle stood, I’m guessing.”

“Perhaps. Just how could this happen, though...” Aria stared down at the destroyed castle. It was no small feat to crush something so thoroughly into a mountain of debris.

“I can’t imagine the castle turning into a pile of rubble just because the revolutionary army came near. Either the Saint used her Divine Arms, or another ancient artifact was used to attack...”

The attack had to have been of a substantial scale to create such a phenomenon.

“The land south of the capital is also ruined. Perhaps the revolutionary army approached from the south and faced the royal army there.”

It wasn’t as simple as the troops marching through—the land was gouged open, protruding in various places.

“The terrain is only ruined on one side. The revolutionary army may have had a one-sided victory.”

In reality, the revolutionary army ten thousand strong had marched from the south, led by Erica. The royal army of two thousand awaited them.

However, the two armies never engaged in combat. Erica had wiped out the two thousand soldiers of the royal army in under a minute. That gave the masses that marched into the city afterwards the momentum to charge straight into the noble district.

“There was something strange about that saint. She was incredibly resilient. If you ever have to face her, please be extra careful,” Aria said with a bitter expression, having faced defeat in Amande.

“Yes, I’ll remain vigilant...” Rio nodded, staring down at the capital city with a severe gaze. They had been following one step behind this entire time, but—

“Let’s check the interior of the city next. It’s our turn to make a move.”

Rio began his descent to the deserted exterior of the city as he carried Aria.

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Meanwhile, a few kilometers away, someone was following after Rio—Reiss. He had just caught sight of Rio and Aria stepping into the city on foot.

“...”

Reiss observed the capital of Ericaburg below him just as Rio and Aria had done so earlier. He gazed upon the ruins of the utterly destroyed castle.

It seems the saint has mastered her hero powers after all. All that's left is to check if she can materialize one of those, and her awakening as a hero is confirmed. The only thing else to be done is pray that she hasn't awakened...

Reiss sighed tiredly, imagining the worst if that were to happen.

For now, the Black Knight should be pitted against the saint to check whether she's awakened. I doubt he has a chance against her if she's really awakened, but he shouldn't have a problem with fleeing if he needs to.

He had already prepared a plan in anticipation of Rio making an attempt to escape. The only issue was how to get Rio and the saint to crush each other for sure, and what to do from there on. He needed to confirm whether the saint was an awakened hero as soon as possible.

The humanoid spirit's snuck to make the rescue while the Black Knight and head attendant wait outside as backup diversions, I guess.

Skilled spirit art users could change the refractive index of the air to become invisible, but that didn't change the fact the user was physically there.

Sending Aishia to infiltrate in her spirit form was clearly the safest option. Their obvious goal to rescue Liselotte made it easy to predict their movements.

Someone as skilled as him would easily be able to retrieve Liselotte Cretia in secret, but I'm afraid I'll be using this opportunity to have him fight.

With a faint smile, Reiss began his descent into the city.

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Haruto. I found Liselotte.

Shortly after Rio and Aria entered the capital of Ericaburg, Aishia contacted them with notice of Liselotte's discovery.

They were currently in an urban area, on a main street with lots of citizens walking by. Business wasn't booming by any means, but the expressions of the pedestrians were bright and full of life. They were in the middle of scouting the area before the rescue plan went ahead.

"Aria, come down this alley for a second. Aishia sent a message." Rio stepped off the main street as he called his traveling companion towards a

deserted back alley.

Thanks. How is she?

Safe and sound. She's been summoned to a meeting that's about to happen. Her guards are with her right now.

In that case, wait until she's alone before making contact with her. Continue watching the situation for now.

Got it.

I'm in town with Aria. We're going to scout the area, then try to sneak as close to your building as possible. If anything strange happens, use your own judgment to make a move. But inform me right away.

Okay.

Like that, Rio gave Aishia the necessary instructions and ended their communications once again.

"It seems she's found Liselotte. She hasn't made contact yet, but she seems to be doing well," he informed Aria.

"I'm glad to hear it..." Aria bowed her head, overcome with emotion.

"She still needs to be saved. We'll do what we can as well. Let's go," Rio said gently, prompting her to move. The fastest escape route after securing Liselotte would be to fly away, but moving vigorously would lift the invisibility art cast on them. Thus, if they wanted to rescue Liselotte without anyone's notice, it would have to be on foot.

When they rescued her, they'd want to walk to somewhere isolated before taking off into the skies. In order to do that, they needed to have a clear understanding of the city's layout. They'd also have to enter the former noble district.

"Right."

The two resumed their exploration of the city.

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Around an hour and a half later at most, the trial-like meeting had concluded, and the congress had finished their verbal attack on Liselotte.

"Here you are..." Andrei opened the door to the room where Liselotte was being confined, prompting her inside.

"Thanks." Liselotte nodded and went through the door obediently. There had been no conversation between her, Andrei, and Natalia on the way back

to this room.

There was no way of telling what she was thinking from her expression and tone of voice. On the other hand, Andrei seemed to have some thoughts after the meeting that had just happened, and had been watching Liselotte with a conflicted face this entire time. Because of that, the air around them was rather heavy.

“Thank you for joining us in the discussion today. Please rest for a while.” Erica’s attitude was completely different compared to the earlier meeting, as she spoke out of consideration for Liselotte.

“I will. Excuse me,” Liselotte replied without turning around to face Erica and marched into the room. Erica and Natalia turned to leave the room as well, but Andrei remained frozen, watching Liselotte’s back.

“...”

Just as he was about to say something, Erica spoke up.

“Let’s go, Andrei,” she said to his back.

“Right...”

Andrei nodded with a drooping head, following Erica and Natalia out of the room.

“Andrei. You may vent those conflicted emotions of yours to me directly,” Erica said once the door closed behind them.

“Saint Erica...” Andrei’s head drooped further as he clenched his fists. “Honestly... I’m disappointed. Despite understanding the injustice of the noble class, she chose to remain a noble. At the end of the day, even someone as wise as her prioritizes their status. She doesn’t give the future of the people any thought. I’ve misjudged her,” he confessed.

“You poor thing, Andrei... You believed in a future where you could work together with her. You are a very pure person, so you’re hurt by having your expectations betrayed. But you still have some expectations left, don’t you? That’s why you didn’t vent your negative emotions to her. You wish for her understanding.”

“That may be true...”

“Andrei, humans can be strongly hurt when they are betrayed. Don’t forget these feelings of yours. Your essence as a human is tested by how you stand up against that pain and despair. That’s why this is an opportunity for you to grow. How will you interact with Liselotte the next time you see her? Give that question some thought by yourself.”

“Okay...” Andrei nodded stiffly.

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Meanwhile, immediately after Erica and the others left the room...

“...”

Liselotte sat down, stifling her vexed emotions. She had been abducted to a foreign country and forced to receive one-sided abuse in a public beating. The reality of that was finally setting in this very moment, and tears welled in her eyes. The feelings swirled in her chest, ready to explode—but she held them back.

“Someone...save me...” Liselotte mumbled hoarsely, pleading for salvation.

At that moment, Aishia materialized in the empty room. “Liselotte.”

“Yes...”

“You okay?”

“I don’t think so.”

Liselotte was in such a daze, she replied to Aishia without thinking. Perhaps that was why she showed a weak side of herself she usually kept hidden.

“I’m sorry. I watched the whole meeting happen, but I couldn’t do anything to help,” Aishia apologized regretfully.

“It’s fine... Wait, what? A-Aishia...? Is that you?” Liselotte finally noticed whom she was talking to.

“Yup.”

Why was Aishia here? How did she sneak in? She just said she watched the whole meeting, but how could she do that? All kinds of questions filled her head, confusing her more and more.

“Wh-Wha?!” She let out a rarely heard sound of clear astonishment.

“Quiet. I came to save you.”

“W-Wait a minute. What’s the meaning of this?” Liselotte asked quietly.

“I was waiting for you to be left alone. That’s why I’m here now. We’re going to sneak out of here together.”

“You came out...of where? How long have you been here?”

“I’ll explain the details after we get outside. Haruto and Aria are waiting.”

“Huh? Sir Haruto and Aria are here too...?”

They had come to save her... Realizing that filled her with an indescribable happiness. Could this be a dream? She pinched her cheek as though to check.

"It's not a dream."

"So it seems..."

"I'm here. You're not alone."

"A-Aishia..."

Unable to hold herself back any longer, tears spilled from Liselotte's eyes.

"Don't cry."

"Sorry..."

"Don't apologize. Wait, I'm contacting Haruto right now." Aishia held up her left hand to tell Liselotte to wait.

"What...?"

What was Aishia saying? Just how could she contact him from here? Liselotte cocked her head in confusion.

"..." Aishia stood in silence for a moment.

"Haruto gave the okay. The preliminary investigations are done, and they're ready to go. All that's left is for me to bring you out of here." It seemed as though she'd really managed to contact him.

"O-Okay?"

What was going on?

"I'm going to neutralize the guards outside the room. Wait here a moment." As soon as she said that, Aishia turned into particles of light and disappeared.

"Huh...?!" Liselotte's eyes widened in shock. Mere seconds later, the door to the room opened with a *click*.

"I knocked them out." Aishia came back into the room, having knocked out the male guard. She closed the door behind her, laying him down on the floor.

"A-An explanation. Please give me an explanation... It doesn't have to be right now, but later."

Liselotte fell speechless for a moment, then gave up on thinking for now. She asked for an explanation later and steadied her nerves for whatever shocks might occur from this moment onwards.

"Sure. I'm going to make us invisible now. Don't let go of my hand, and don't make any loud noises."

“Okay!”

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She can turn invisible? Wow! Simple thoughts raced through Liselotte's mind as she gave a short but delighted reply, holding onto Aishia's left hand tightly as directed.

"..." Aishia opened the door with her right hand and silently activated her spirit arts. A soft wind wrapped around them.

The next moment, Liselotte could no longer see her surroundings. It was as though she was separated from the world by a layer of fog. Aishia, who could visualize magic essence, didn't have an issue seeing outside the fog. At the same time, anyone outside the fog wouldn't be able to see them within it.

What...? This isn't magic?

The confusion in Liselotte's mind was overwritten by amazement. There'd be no end to it if she acted shocked by everything that happened.

"Don't touch the fog you can see. The space will shake and it'll undo the illusion."

"R-Right."

There was one thing she understood: Haruto, Aishia, and Aria were the strongest people in the Galarc Kingdom right now. And the three of them were currently risking themselves for her. She'd suffered alone since being brought to this country, making her all the happier that the three had come for her. They were so reliable, she couldn't suppress her elated emotions.

"Thank you very much." Instead of replying loudly, Liselotte gave Aishia's hand a firm squeeze.

"No worries. All that's left is to walk quietly to Haruto and Aria. Let's go." Aishia pulled Liselotte by the hand, leading her towards a bright future.

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At the same time, Rio and Aria were waiting in a deserted alley roughly five minutes from the building where Liselotte was being held captive. They were ready to execute their rescue plan, so Rio was wearing his black wyvern coat.

"They've just left Liselotte's room. We'll be able to meet up with them in five minutes at the earliest. It's finally time," Rio informed Aria. They were to act as diversions and guards if something were to happen, but if Liselotte and Aishia were able to leave the room in an invisible state then they shouldn't have any issue getting here.

Once they met up, the plan was to either continue on foot if no one noticed Liselotte's disappearance, or take to the skies and speed away if a commotion was stirred up.

"Hopefully they'll be able to reach us without any issues..."

"As long as the invisibility art is up, it'll be hard to detect them without having extremely sharp senses. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"If I may ask out of curiosity... What does it actually look like when they disappear?" Aria asked hesitantly.

"Would you like to see for yourself?"

Rio activated his spirit arts. A gentle wind wrapped around his body. From Aria's view, the air where Rio stood distorted for a few seconds before he completely vanished. An empty space without any distortion remained. No matter how you looked at it, there was no sign of anyone standing there.

"I see... That's impressive. You become one with the background in a matter of seconds." Aria's eyes widened.

"It only makes you invisible to the eye, so voices can still be heard and presences can still be felt. The illusion only removes visual information. Vigorous movement will undo the invisibility, and anything that touches the barrier will make the air shake. Anyone who can visualize magic essence will notice that abnormality. It's not an almighty trick, so it can't be trusted too much..." Rio said, listing the demerits of invisibility arts.

It wasn't as though they disappeared from this plane like when a spirit turned into their spirit form, so it was hard to use in combat. Against a spirit art user who could visualize essence, it was little more than a party trick.

"It's still plenty useful, I believe. It's extremely hard to detect your presence from afar. Anyone who doesn't know about the trick will be completely fooled. We're able to make such a bold rescue plan because of it too," Aria said, impressed.

It was at that moment that they heard it.

A booming explosion roared from the direction of the official building—several times in succession. Immediately afterwards...

I'm sorry, Haruto. Someone saw through the invisibility art.

A telepathic message from Aishia reached Rio.

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Shortly before Rio showed the invisibility spirit art to Aria, Aishia and Liselotte were marching through the mansion.

We really can't be seen by anyone... Amazing.

They passed numerous soldiers patrolling the building, but not a single one had noticed the two of them.

The only problem was the guard in front of Liselotte's room going missing—if anyone noticed that and checked inside the room, they'd see she had gone missing. But it was unlikely for that to happen in the time it took them to leave the building. There was no sign of anyone hurrying through the corridors either.

However, the real problem happened just as they were about to leave the door and go outside. They were walking through the courtyard towards the gate, when...

"Hey, the hostage is trying to run! It's Liselotte! Liselotte Cretia is running away!" someone yelled loudly.

Aishia hadn't dispelled their invisibility. She cast her sharp gaze around their surroundings.

"I'm going to carry you." She suddenly picked Liselotte up in a bridal carry. The moment she did so, the invisibility art was canceled. No sooner had she done that—

"Aah!"

Orbs of light dozens of centimeters in diameter came raining down where she stood. *Boom*! an explosive sound roared.

It wasn't a single orb that rained down—a second, third, fourth, and fifth shot in short succession. Each one had quite the power behind it, and they fell at a moderate speed. With Liselotte in her arms, Aishia took light steps to evade each shot. Each orb landed with a heavy explosion, gouging open the land. Aishia looked up at the sky, watching out for a follow-up attack, but the barrage seemed to have ended. However, the succession of attacks had sent a roar through the city. Naturally, the guards around them had noticed the abnormality and were closing in on them.

I'm sorry, Haruto. Someone saw through the invisibility art, Aishia immediately reported to Rio.

Plan B. Fly away immediately and prioritize Liselotte's safety. I'll back you up from the skies, Rio replied promptly.

"Liselotte, we're going with Plan B."

“P-Plan B?”

Liselotte looked bewildered at the first mention of a Plan B.

“Here goes.” Aishia kicked off the ground, leaping up. She gained more and more altitude, just as the guards of the estate gathered outside the building. Erica, Andrei, and Natalia were among them.

“W-Wait... What? What?!”

They had easily jumped several meters high. The jump was seemingly made with no destination in mind, so Liselotte wondered where they were jumping for at first. That thought was then followed by the realization they weren’t falling—they were rising higher and higher against gravity instead, making her eyes widen.

Liselotte had decided not to feel shocked at everything anymore, but the consecutive events that surpassed her common sense left her astonished.

Just then, orbs of light passed over Aishia’s head in a gentle arc. They were smaller than the ones earlier, but there were many more of them, and much faster in speed.

“Guh...” Aishia suddenly dropped her altitude, slipping under the rush of orbs. If she had continued rising as she was before, she would have taken the attack directly.

In the next moment, more orbs rained down. This time they weren’t raining downwards to suppress her flight, but directly towards her. It was an attack clearly calculated to control her movements.

“Hold onto me tightly.”

“R-Right!”

Aishia took off in a zigzagging burst. But even as she dodged the orbs, more were fired at her without end.

Haruto, there’s an enemy firing long-distance shots to prevent me from gaining altitude. A skilled spirit arts caster. The same person who saw through my invisibility, I believe.

Aishia contacted Rio while evading the attacks. She would have been able to handle the situation alone, but it was hard to make fine movements and increase her speed while carrying Liselotte.

Got it, Rio replied. At the same time, Saint Erica burst up from the ground towards Aishia, who was flying at a low altitude of five meters or so.

“You’re not getting away.”

She swung her bishop staff, seemingly attempting to knock the two of

them back to the ground by force.

We've arrived, Rio's voice echoed in Aishia's head as someone leaped down towards Saint Erica. It was Aria.

"Huh?!"

Erica noticed the shadow over her and braced her staff above her head. It immediately clashed with the sword Aria swung down with all her might.

"Haaah!" Aria used the momentum of her fall to add to the physical strength of her enhanced body, swinging her sword vigorously. Having braced herself late, Erica was hit with the attack.

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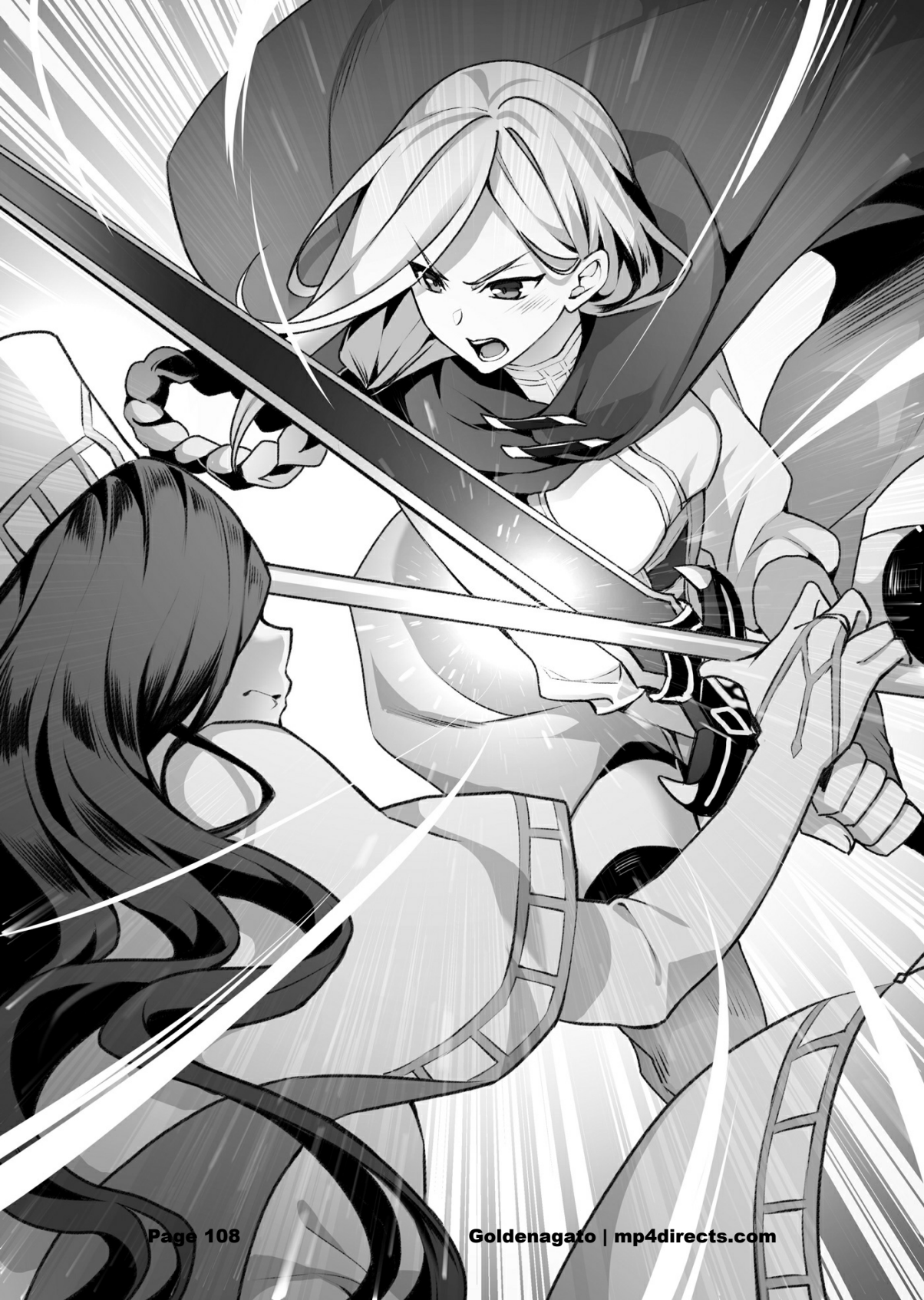

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“Guh...” Her body was knocked down, and she slammed heavily into the ground. She was unable to make a safe landing and bounced fiercely, rolling across it. Aria landed after her lightly.

Meanwhile, Rio fell down beside Aishia and swung his wind-clad sword, slashing away the orbs of light raining at her.

Aria... Sir Haruto! Liselotte looked between the two of them, overcome with emotion.

Aishia. Another change of plan. Aria and I will take over here. You fly out of the city like this. Don’t worry about the long-ranged shots. I’ll block them all.

As soon as Rio sent that message, he created dozens of orbs of light himself. They were less than ten centimeters in diameter, and there were just enough of them not to block his vision.

Okay. Aishia nodded, then accelerated towards the perimeter of the city.

“D-Don’t let them get away! Go! Go after them! Someone, assist Saint Erica!” Andrei, who had been dazed by the series of events unfolding, snapped back to his senses and gave the nearby guards orders.

“It’s fine. I won’t be defeated by something like this.” Erica slowly got to her feet, then raised her voice to declare her safety. She brushed the dirt off her clothes in annoyance, seemingly having taken no damage at all.

“Saint Erica!”

“Oh, Saint Erica!” Those watching on spoke in awe. Erica lifted her staff as though to respond to them.

She was slammed into the ground with that much force and got up without a scratch. She’s as tough as Aria described her... Rio observed Erica below him and swallowed.

“I was wondering who was causing this commotion, but I see now. And the boy above you is the one from the Galarc Castle. So you followed me?” Erica looked between Aria standing before her and Rio floating above her, then sighed tiredly.

“Leave the saint to me!” Aria yelled at Rio. Part of her intention was probably to have Rio stand on watch with his abilities to cover the sky and ground, but she must have had her own emotions towards Erica after what happened in Amande. The intention and resolution to end Erica’s life if the situation called for it could be seen in her eyes.

“Got it... I won’t let anyone interrupt.”

Not the soldiers on the ground, nor the spirit arts user hiding to provide long-ranged support. Rio cast his attention across the area with his sharp gaze.

“These people are servants of Galarc nobles that have come to retrieve Liselotte Cretia! I shall inflict divine punishment upon them!”

With that declaration, Erica raised her bishop staff and charged at Aria. At the same time, Aria stepped forward to close the space between them. Once they were within reach of each other, they swung their weapons and began a fierce exchange. Erica had more physical strength, but Aria stood up to her with superior maneuvers and combat techniques.

Aria said that Saint Erica has a powerful physical body enhancement, but her movements are still those of an amateur. I agree—as long as no one hinders them, this match will be Aria’s.

Rio observed Erica’s movements from above and judged it safe to leave it to Aria.

“S-Support Saint Erica now! Apprehend that insolent woman!” Andrei ordered the soldiers gathered at the estate, attempting to block Aria’s movements with their numbers.

“Raaaargh!” The soldiers started charging at Aria from every direction. At this rate, the battlefield would become a disorderly mess.

Foreseeing their movements, Rio scattered the orbs of light he had set up around himself, raining them down on the soldiers from a height of ten meters. None of the orbs had enough force to kill unless they hit critical points, but they had enough force to send a large man flying several meters with a direct hit.

“Guh!”

“Whoa!”

Every single orb hit its mark, knocking the soldiers unconscious. In the span of a few seconds, more than a dozen soldiers fell to the ground. There were still soldiers on their feet, but...

“Eek...”

They faltered at the sight of their comrades being blown away by the rain of light that appeared out of nowhere. Once they realized that approaching Aria meant coming under Rio’s fire, their legs stopped. Rio replenished his light orbs as soon as he fired them, so their will to fight was whittled away.

“Wh-What are you doing?! Fight! If you can’t approach that brazen

woman, aim for the man flying there. Release your spells, your arrows!" Andrei ordered the soldiers around him anew.

"Ngh..."

"*Glacies Projectilis!*"

Several people with the means to attack at a distance fired their bows and chanted spells for low-level attack magic, aiming them at Rio. He twirled in the air, spinning to get a 360-degree look at the ground. Once he confirmed where the scattered attacks were coming from, he sent all of his light orbs shooting off at the same time. The orbs darted erratically, as though they had minds of their own, as they chased down each attack spell and arrow. Some extra orbs even went to make a counterattack on the soldiers, knocking them unconscious.

"Wh-What is that man...?"

"How can a human float in the air?"

"What are those balls of light?"

Rio had gained complete control of his surroundings. Sensing that, the remaining soldiers on the ground lost their will to fight.

"Is there nothing we can do but watch...?" Andrei fell to his knees in despair.

With no one to interrupt them, the battle between Aria and Erica had grown more intense. Erica was still the stronger one in physical abilities, but it seemed like Aria had the winning edge. Her combat skills had allowed her to take the lead with counterattacks.

The fight was leaning in favor of Rio and Aria. If they continued like this, the outcome would be clear in a matter of minutes. But for some reason, the Saint was yet to enhance her physical body. Her hidden strength was still unknown.

Something's strange. I've had control over the air this entire time, but the person who shot at Aishia hasn't made any attempts to attack me.

Unlike when Aishia tried to escape with Liselotte, all aerial attacks had ceased. Rio had taken position in the air since he had been the most wary of the mysterious spirit arts user, so he found this quite strange.

"It seems I am at a disadvantage here after all. I can't fight with all my strength." Erica suddenly came to a stop on the ground.

"Refusing to accept your defeat?" Aria said, cautiously pausing.

"I cannot exert my power to the fullest. The citizens I should be protecting

have fallen around me, writhing in pain. If I were to use my power under these conditions, they'd be killed. This man in the sky may seem like a gentleman, but his methods are rather cunning," Erica said as she looked up.

Aishia, how are things over there? Anything strange? Rio asked, ignoring Erica.

Nothing yet. I've reached the southernmost edge of our communication range. In other words, she was roughly one kilometer south of Rio—a short distance out of the city, most likely.

All right. The spirit arts user that obstructed you has stopped attacking here. They may have gone your way, so be careful. We're about to wrap things up here.

Okay.

With that, their transmission ended.

"Pretending I don't exist? What a cold man," Erica lamented from below.

"I don't see the person that interrupted your escape before we arrived. I have a bad feeling about it—let's retreat soon," Rio said to Aria below as he ignored Erica's words yet again.

"Understood," Aria replied.

If she had to choose between fighting Saint Erica and securing Liselotte's safety, she'd prioritize the latter. She wasn't about to forget that through her hatred. Aria was still as calm as ever.

"Oh? Did you think you could escape so easily after making such a commotion on enemy grounds?" Erica raised her staff, grinning in defiance.

"You were the one who started it in our kingdom. You have no right to be criticizing others," Aria snapped back immediately.

"Hehehe..."

Aria raised her sword, ready to stop Erica at a moment's notice. But in the next moment, Rio launched all his light orbs at the ground, surrounding Aria in a cone shape. The wall of orbs separated Aria from Erica, and in that single instant Rio descended to the ground to pick Aria up in his arms.

"Let's go."

He rose into the air once more, continuing to an altitude of ten-odd meters high.

There still aren't any attacks preventing our escape...

At the same time, there were no reports of a surprise attack from Aishia. Why? Rio racked his brain for a reason as he hurried to meet up with Aishia

and Liselotte. Meanwhile...

So she can't use her power fully with people around. But if she lets them leave the city, she'll be helpless... What will the Saint do now, hmm?

From far above in the skies, Reiss was watching everything unfold.

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Meanwhile, in the estate garden immediately after Rio and Aria left, a dismal mood hung in the air. Everyone in the garden had just tasted what despair was like. It was their first defeat since the revolution, and it seeped into them like a poison. The Holy Democratic Republic of Erica was lacking in any real combat experience; most of the battles that took place during the revolution were won with Erica's power—they were victories unachievable without her. Thus, the soldiers were far less proficient compared to the armies of other kingdoms. Their opponent this time was a bad matchup, but he had provided them a vivid lesson. They were completely underprepared. Utterly powerless.

"Aah! Oh, Saint Erica! Forgive me, forgive us! We were helpless against him! We were unable to do anything, leaving you to fight alone!" Andrei was as shaken as a man sinking in a swamp of despair, apologizing to Erica with everything he had.

"It's all right, Andrei. Everyone else too. You all fought courageously."

Erica gave them a kind, motherly smile and shook her head.

"Saint Erica!"

"Saint Erica!"

"Saint Erica!"

Everyone called Erica's name, seeking salvation.

"Liselotte Cretia is a witch after all! A witch! She brought misfortune to this country! She is the symbol of disaster!" Andrei's face twisted with murderous fury as he declared Liselotte's existence as evil itself.

"I'm sorry. I was the one who brought her here. This was all because of my poor judgment." Erica suddenly adopted a sorrowful look as she admitted her own mistake.

"No! Not at all! Who could have known? Who could have known that her gentle, saintlike demeanor hid her true face as a witch! She sympathized with the people and recited impressive words at us to win our hearts! That woman

is a cunning witch!" Andrei insisted that Erica wasn't to be blamed by expressing contempt for Liselotte.

"Those who invaded us today are the powers possessed by the evil noble class of a major nation. The evil we defeated through revolution was tiny in comparison. As long as huge nations like theirs exist, our country will always be in danger."

"Oh, oooh! We were so ignorant, truly! How could we have been so foolish?!"

"You must not become conceited, Andrei. I've always reminded you—humans are foolish creatures."

Andrei gasped, then looked even more regretful. "I was truly, truly foolish... How could I have been so blind..."

"But you must not forget this either: humans are only able to face their true selves when they face their despair. So face it! Learn, without running away! About yourself as a person, about your emotions that remain after the despair. Then use those emotions as fuel to step forward! Do you still have the will to keep moving? Democracy won't progress without utterly crushing the noble class of the continent. You should be well aware of that. Will you let that stop you?! Do you still wish to make a world for the people?!" Erica raised her bishop staff high, fanning the emotions of her audience with her questions.

"I-I want to move forward!"

"We want to keep going!"

"But how can we?!"

"Do we have the power to do such a thing?!"

Those listening to her raised their voices.

"You do! I said this to them: did you think you could escape so easily after making such a commotion on enemy grounds? So don't worry—you have me with you! Can you believe in me? In me, and in the miracles I've performed until now?!"

"Of course!"

"Without question!"

"I believe!"

"We'll believe in you!"

"Me too!"

The voices gradually grew more lively.

“In that case, I shall show you another miracle today! I was planning on saving my power for invading the major nations, but it cannot be helped. A major nation has trampled all over our soil!”

With the bishop staff in her right hand, Erica spread her arms wide and looked up at the skies.

“Protector of the weak, the people, this nation! The greatest divine beast, the guardian beast, shall protect the people and slay all evil! Now is the time for judgment! I summon thee, beast of the land!”

A giant shadow immediately covered the inner courtyard like a cloud.

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Chapter 6: Beast of the Land

It happened just as Rio flew out of Ericaburg with Aria in his arms. He had spotted Aishia and Liselotte hiding behind a boulder in the wasteland south of the capital, when—

"What?!" Rio felt a bizarre rise in magic essence from behind him. He turned back to face the capital in a panic.

"What...is that...?"

"Wha..."

Rio and Aria were both rendered speechless.

"..."

The two on the ground could see it as well; Liselotte was cowering with bated breath, and Aishia was glaring at it with a grim expression.

They were all staring at a four-legged beast that stood so tall it made the enormous black wyvern Rio had once fought seem small in comparison.

In a space of a hundred meters in diameter, particles of light were gathering to form a shape like a materializing spirit.

It wasn't exactly the same, but its form resembled a rugged, ferocious fighting bull. Most of its exterior was covered in a rocklike surface, and three twisting, snake-headed tails extended from its rear. It was a creature beyond this world—a mythical beast.

Once the four-legged beast materialized in the air, it remained floating and stared down Rio and Aria from a kilometer away. Its eyes were filled with a hatred that couldn't be described as mere rage.

"ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!" An intense roar of fury shook the air across the nation.

Haruto...!

Aishia's voice was in a rare fluster.

Yeah, that thing is bad! Rio replied as he quickly descended to her.

"You need to evacuate immediately!" He drew his sword, giving the three of them an order with a look of undisguised panic.

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Meanwhile, in the skies above Ericaburg, high enough for the four-legged beast to look minuscule in size...

Now that's a roar that hasn't been heard in a thousand years...

Reiss watched the four-legged beast materialize.

The saint has awakened after all. That means she's obtained the right to step into the domain of transcendence, just once.

His gaze was quite serious.

I didn't expect her to do so in this fight, but... Now that things have come to this, it's time to see how much of a fight the Black Knight can put up against a divine beast.

The fierce battle would commence immediately after.

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"The three of you need to evacuate immediately!"

Just as Rio gave his order, the four-legged beast—no, the "beast of the land," as Erica called it, glared at Rio and the others on the ground, before a powerful shell of magic essence appeared in its mouth. The condensed essence was about thirty meters in diameter.

This is bad! Rio immediately sent his essence into his sword.

"Hah!" The beast released its essence shell.

"Oh..." Before Liselotte knew it, the shell was closing in right before her eyes, and she could do nothing but tremble. She couldn't even react. Meanwhile, Aria yanked Liselotte towards her in order to cover her.

"It's okay," Aishia said at the same time Rio swung his sword. The blade was coiled in a fierce, storm-like wind.

"Oh!"

The wind that was released with a diagonal slash from bottom left to top right cut down the essence shell. It wasn't enough to reflect the shot, but it was enough to send it off course. The redirected shot landed several hundred meters behind them in the wasteland, exploding with a tremendous shock wave. There was enough momentum for a typhoon to reach the position where Rio and the others stood.

"Gah..." Liselotte staggered in place, but Aria supported her body.

Fragments of broken earth from the center of the explosion flew their way too. Rio realized that, but before he could move, Aria created a wall of wind to steer the boulders away from them.

"I'll block them."

Suddenly, the beast began flying at a speed unthinkable for its huge size. It made a beeline for Rio and the others outside of the city. Or so it seemed, when it turned to the right and put a kilometer of distance between them—but only for a few seconds. The movement speed of the huge beast had caused the atmosphere to shake, creating a violent wind. A cloud of dust was kicked up from the earth, but that was blocked by Aishia's wall as well.

It changed locations? But why?

Rio was unsure of the reason why the beast had moved. However, he had no information to go off, so he was unable to make a guess.

"Vrah!" The beast of the land opened its mouth once more, and a tremendous amount of magic essence gathered again. This time, it was clearly more powerful than the first shot.

With that much magic essence, the attack will be beyond imagination...

If he moved rashly, he might not be able to protect everyone. With that judgment, Rio instantly yelled in a louder voice than ever before. "Once I block the second shot, Aishia will take you two and flee south! Run until you feel it's safe!"

At the same time, he refined his own essence in order to confront the beast's attack.

He drew out more of his power than he ever had before. The essence, which normally couldn't be seen by normal humans, had become visible, but he didn't have high hopes.

Can I really block this...?!

That was how great the essence the beast was condensing was. Rio didn't have the confidence in himself to match that.

"That's..." Seeing the pure light of magic essence flowing from Rio's body, Liselotte and Aria's eyes widened.

"Haruto, I'll block the first shot with you," Aishia said from behind Rio.

"All right... Please use all the magic essence you've got. I'll go first, you join in once you've built up enough essence," Rio replied without looking back.

"Okay." Aishia nodded and hugged Rio gently from behind.

"..." Liselotte and Aria watched on in a daze.

The path between them allowed the essence sleeping within Rio to transfer to Aishia. Soon enough, Aishia's body was also overflowing with essence that was visible to the human eye.

Just as the two enhanced their essence to the max, the beast of the land finished readying its attack.

"It's okay. You can protect them, Haruto," Aishia said softly, whispering into Rio's ear.

"Thank you..."

That allowed Rio to snap to his senses, regaining some of his confidence. In order not to hinder Rio's movements, Aishia took one step back and released him. Immediately after...

"RAAAAAAAAAAH!" A piercing scream shook the air. Pure destructive energy was released from the beast of the land's mouth. Energy that could disintegrate every material it touched, leaving not even dust behind.

"Haaah!" Against such an opponent, Rio tried to neutralize the attack with his own destructive energy. Two beams of destructive light collided with each other by the outskirts of the city.

"Wh-What...?" With Liselotte in her arms, Aria stood her ground using her physically enhanced body.

"They're...evenly matched?" Liselotte squinted her eyes to see what was happening. However, she couldn't process the situation at all; her vision was blinded white by the collision of light and light. Considering how the attack hadn't reached them, they must have been able to compete with each other...

"I don't know. It's too hard to tell, but...!"

Aria couldn't tell what was happening either. It took everything she had just to keep them from being blown away.

"R-Right! We can only believe in them!" Liselotte squeezed her eyes shut in prayer, clinging to Aria.

The current situation was like a back-and-forth pushing game. In other words, whoever wasn't able to maintain their attack first would lose the push.

No matter how much magic essence slept within Rio's body, activating arts and maintaining their activation required the action of refining essence and releasing it from the body.

It was impossible for even Rio to keep up an art of this scale for an

extended period of time. His limit was approaching by the moment, but Rio wasn't alone right now.

"I've got enough essence now. Let's push it back, Haruto," Aishia's voice echoed. She stood beside Rio and released her accumulated energy. To an onlooker, it would've seemed like the beast of the land's beam was winning against Rio's, but by combining their energies, Rio and Aishia tilted the balance of fate in their favor in a single moment. The beam from the beast of the land was repelled in an instant.

"AAAAAAH?!" The spirit art from the two of them enveloped the beast of the land.

"Now!" Rio yelled.

"Right!"

Aishia whipped around, grabbing Liselotte and Aria together. She then accelerated in a single burst of wind spirit arts.

"Oh!"

"Ugh..."

Aria's body was strengthened through her enchanted sword, but the gravitational forces were rather painful for Liselotte's unprotected body.

However, such speed was necessary to escape. While Rio was still maintaining the attack, Aishia took Liselotte and Aria away from the scene as fast as she could.

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Meanwhile, those in the center of the city were able to observe the collision of magic essence between Rio and the beast of the land. Though they were a fair distance from the outer wall, the shells of light that were several tens of meters in diameter were hot enough to bathe the city in a heated wind.

"Wh-Whoa..."

Those gathered in the garden of the government building were continuously rendered speechless by the unbelievable sight.

What... What is the meaning of this? How could the divine beast lose in power? There shouldn't be any human strong enough to stop the divine beast. This isn't right!

The situation was unexpected for Erica as well, whose eyes were wide.

For the record, “divine beast” was the other name by which Erica referred to the beast of the land.

She had honestly thought things would be over with the first attack. That was her intention when she summoned it. Yet it had required an even stronger second attack. And just when she believed it was over this time, for some reason a stronger attack came firing back.

According to her expectations, Erica was meant to be rejoicing over the defeat of the formidable enemy outside the city right now.

Are you saying this boy’s strength is equal to the power of a major nation? There was no way I could have expected this. How many people in a major nation have this level of strength?

What if there were multiple people like this?

There may be difficult situations for me to win one-sidedly in the future. Is he a hero as well? Is that how he obtained power equal to mine? If so, my plan may be forced to deviate.

Many questions flashed through Erica’s mind.

“I must confirm for myself,” she muttered, and began walking towards the estate gate.

“P-Please wait, Saint Erica.” Andrei snapped back to his senses and called out to her.

“What is it, Andrei?”

“Where are you going?”

“To oversee the fight with my own eyes.”

The moment Erica uttered that, sounds of despair came from those standing around the garden.

“Ah! Aaah!”

The light beam from Rio and Aishia had enveloped the beast of the land.

“Agh!”

“Eek!”

“O-Our guardian beast!”

“It’s over!”

Everyone stooped over in fear, screaming in shock. They were completely convinced that the guardian beast had been defeated.

“Calm down, everyone! Do you not believe in me, in the miracle I have created?!”

Erica slammed the end of her bishop staff into the ground, calling out to

everyone. The commotion immediately quieted as their gazes focused on her.

"B-But the guardian beast, the beast of the land has..." Andrei said on behalf of the others. His face was pale as a sheet as he glanced over at where the divine beast stood. The beam Rio had released had already faded, but a tremendous cloud of dust blocked their view in its place.

"It's okay, the guardian beast won't be defeated just like that," Erica stated resolutely. "However, I may have misjudged the power of a major nation. That's why I want to see it with my own eyes. If necessary, I will finish things with my own hands. Do not stop me."

"I-In that case, I shall go too!"

Andrei immediately tried to follow Erica as she left, but—

"Andrei, you are the prime minister. Take control of the city in my place. You can help more by doing that than by following me."

"I... I understand."

Andrei was admonished by Erica. He bit down on his lip and nodded in frustration.

"Then please allow me to accompany you in Mister Andrei's place!" Natalia offered firmly.

Erica sighed heavily. "Your life may be placed in danger... Are you prepared for that?" she asked.

"I am prepared! I am willing to sacrifice my life for you, Saint Erica. When will I fight if not now?"

Natalia expressed her desire to fight without fear. Then...

"Th-That's right!"

"I'll go too!"

"Me too!"

"And I!"

"Please allow us to go!"

The soldiers piped up in agreement.

"Fine... However, we must move as quickly as possible. Only those who can enchant their physical abilities and keep up like Natalia may come along. I'll allow ten of you at most—you'll be fighting if the need arises. I will go first." Erica seemed to be in a hurry, as she started running without adding anything further.

"*Augendae Corporis!*"

Natalia used the magic artifact around her arm to increase her physical

abilities and started after Erica. Others chanted the spell after her and chased behind them in scattered groups.

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After confirming that Aishia had taken Liselotte and Aria as far away from him as possible, Rio glared at the beast of the land instead of fleeing after them.

This guy's magic essence hasn't weakened at all.

As the rearguard, Rio began refining his own essence once again in preparation for a follow-up attack from the beast, concealed as it was by the huge dust cloud of destruction.

I have to defeat this thing here. I cannot allow it to go near the Galarc Kingdom.

He may have been able to flee with Aishia, but Rio had a reason to stay here and fight.

"Rah!"

Suddenly, three beams of light fired out of the dust cloud. Each beam was far weaker than the shells they'd fired at each other just now, but even then they were enough to burn the ground they touched. Each beam of light closed in on the point where Rio stood.

"Ah!" Rio broke into a run, using wind spirit arts to accelerate in a single burst. He slipped under the beams of light and closed in on the beast. The dust cloud covering the beast cleared with the wind.

Unharmed, huh...

Rio frowned grimly. The beast's form was exactly the same as when Rio first saw it. The three tails that had snakelike heads were what had fired the three beams of light. Each tail swayed as though it had a mind of its own as they aimed for Rio.

It was quite a blow to know that the earlier attack hadn't left a scratch, but Rio proceeded forward without hesitation. Just because he was scared didn't mean he could run away.

He slipped past the rain of light beams and closed the distance to the beast, setting up several orbs of light around him, each measuring ten-odd meters in diameter. He then sent them flying towards the beast.

Each had enough power to demolish a castle wall with a direct hit, but

seeing how it was unharmed after the earlier light battle, he didn't have high hopes.

I doubt an attack of this level will have any effect, but...

When the snake tails saw Rio's light orbs approaching, they changed the trajectories of their breaths to cut down the orbs.

It blocked the light orbs? Did that mean a direct hit would've caused damage? That was the thought that instantly passed through Rio's mind.

...I want to see what happens when an attack hits.

The scale of their first attacks had been so huge he hadn't been able to visually confirm the direct hit. The dust cloud had cleared to what seemed like an unharmed beast, so he thought he had failed to damage it. But why would it need to defend itself if so?

At this point, the distance between the two sides was less than a hundred meters. The size difference between them was like a human looking up at a castle.

"Rah!" The beast lifted a front leg and slammed it down in an attempt to crush Rio, and it immediately sounded as though a huge explosion had gone off. The area around the point of contact was folded upwards by the shock wave, shaking the entire surroundings.

If it had made a direct hit, even a human with a physically enhanced body would have died instantly, but...

"..."

With his sword held aloft, Rio had moved above the beast's head. While floating with his spirit arts, he landed a direct hit against the back of its head with a wind-clad blade—

"URRAH?!" The beast stumbled, dropping towards the ground.

So it can be damaged after all...?

Rio clearly witnessed the attack make a direct hit, confirming that the back of its head was gouged open. However, he could see the wound heal itself cleanly right before his eyes. This left him unsure if it counted as true damage or not.

"Guh."

In place of the head that was thrown off-balance, the three heads at the end of its tails snapped at Rio instead. Rio waited until the last moment to see through the abnormal movements of the tails, then twisted himself midair to avoid the attack.

“Vrah?!”

He landed on one of the tails and ran the tip of his sword from top to bottom, running along the tail. It split open like a neat scalpel cut.

Perhaps it could feel pain. A screeching roar filled Rio’s ears, but the wound was already stitching itself back together.

The other two tails snapped, trying to swallow Rio and the tail he was standing on whole.

“Gwah?!” The tail that was bitten squirmed in pain. The other two tails seemed to think they had bitten down on Rio, as they were chewing furiously.

However, Rio had already jumped onto the beast’s back. He watched the tails and launched two huge orbs of fire at them, directly hitting the heads of the tails.

“GWAAAH!” The two tails stopped chewing when they were shrouded in fire and started shaking themselves to extinguish the flames. At the same time, Rio put more magic essence into his sword.

“Haaah!”

He accelerated along the beast’s back with wind spirit arts, running towards its rear. As he approached the tails, he released a slash of light that was more than ten meters wide, slicing off the three tails at the base. He then leaped off the beast’s rear and immediately turned back to check the state of the wound.

How about that...?!

The three tails were all decapitated. However, all three were still moving, and began flying like long-bodied wyverns. On top of that, all three were automatically healing the damage Rio had dealt to them.

“Ngh...” The tails fired laser beams from their mouths at Rio. The beast’s main body also looked up at Rio and released five beams of light from its mouth. Each one had just as much power as the beams coming from the tails.

A total of eight beams of light tried to pierce through the air and cut Rio down. Rio changed his course of movement and jumped, evading the attacks.

It was difficult to evade eight beams while at close range, so he distanced himself for now. He stopped at around one kilometer from the beast, but at this size scale it still felt close.

Separating it from the body and allowing it to move freely is basically increasing the number of enemies. There’d be no end to things like this...

He was definitely doing damage with attacks of a certain scale. But the

instant self-recovery was nullifying that damage. Up until this point, Rio had been one-sidedly dealing damage, but it was hard to say the battle was in his favor. It could hardly be called an even match.

If I get hit just once, I'll be in trouble.

Eight beams of light fired at Rio incessantly, and evading them all was mentally wearing. What could he do? How could he prevail?

What is this thing, anyway? It suddenly appeared in the sky above the city. A spirit? But can spirits have this much power when they're not in humanoid form? The saint is controlling it...right? If her secret power is to control earth, how can she create creatures like this? What is the ability hidden in her Divine Arms?

He considered possibilities of the beast's identity in order to find its weaknesses, but he couldn't settle on a conclusion. Rio desperately racked his brain as he dodged the beams.

I can't see an end to that regenerative ability, but... Should I try to make another attack on the body? If I can behead the beast itself...

One idea filled his head—that there was no creature that could live with its head cut off. The heart was another weakness of a living creature, but it was hard to tell where the heart was located in a body this huge. That's why he would aim for the neck—perhaps he could defeat it that way.

He sure hoped so.

However, in order to do that, he'd have to dodge the eight beams of light and approach the body again. It took all he had to evade them at this distance already, so it would be even more taxing to get closer.

On top of that, from the regeneration he'd observed until now, there was no guarantee that beheading it would be enough to defeat it. Just then—

Is that...the saint?

He spotted Saint Erica bursting out of the gate to the city. She had come running from the official estate with her body enhanced by her Divine Arms. Natalia and the others, who could only use the weaker physical ability enchantment, were still yet to arrive.

Is this beast being controlled by her after all?

The beast was so big, it wouldn't be strange for the city to be affected by its attacks—yet it had been completely unharmed until now.

If she's the one controlling it...

One possibility came to Rio's mind. Perhaps if the saint died, the beast

would disappear too. If the saint was in control, then that was a possibility. In fact, based on the situation, he was almost certain of this.

The battle would only get worse for him at this rate. And if the saint could control this beast, she could make it attack the Galarc Kingdom.

No choice but to try.

Rio readied himself. He rapidly altered his course to descend upon the saint by the city gate, and he didn't neglect to keep refining magic essence in his body in order to deal with the beast's attacks either. He was sending essence to his sword even as he evaded the attacks.

Just then, the beam of light aimed at Rio's descent veered off to the sky. All eight beams started avoiding Rio. It was as though it was actively avoiding dealing any damage to the city.

The beast's attack missed! I knew it! The hypothesis in Rio's head changed to a certainty.

"..." Erica watched Rio descend with an eerie smile on her face. There was over a kilometer of distance between them, but right now Rio was moving at a speed that was pushing the limits of his body. At his speed, he could close that gap in less than ten seconds even while moving erratically to dodge the eight beams of light.

However, the divine beast wasn't about to let Rio approach Erica without a fight. The main body and three tails moved with light steps unbefitting of its huge size, standing in the way of Rio to protect Erica and the city.

So fast...!

The divine beast's speed was on par with Rio's. Its enormous body that easily measured over a hundred meters could move around rapidly. The wind that blew around them was like a storm. But its directivity seemed to be controlled, as it sent a strong countercurrent in Rio's direction.

It was the moment of truth. If he backed down here, the divine beast would interfere to protect Erica, leaving no hope of improving the situation. Letting it take position before the city meant the saint and her beast's movements would be restricted. They would use fiercer attacks to draw Rio away from the city, making it even harder to approach.

Thus, this moment where his opponent had just gone on the defensive was his best chance. Rio activated his spirit arts to interfere with the stormy winds blowing against him. Repelling it would require a tremendous amount of magic essence, but he couldn't use his essence excessively if he wanted to

finish off the beast's main body.

In other words, he had to secure a flight route and push his way through. Rio enhanced the wind barrier around him with that image in mind.

His speed towards the divine beast increased even further. The faster he went, the more his trajectory straightened out, but he wanted to close the distance before his opponent could ready itself as much as possible.

"Grah!" The divine beast's main body suddenly resumed firing its light beam. The three tails also moved nearby, spitting their lasers out to block Rio's descending approach.

"Ugh..."

In order to evade the eight thick beams of light, Rio started moving in a zigzag line. But the erratic movements on top of his maximum speed were quite a burden on his body, and his face twisted in pain.

The g-forces from his acceleration alone were strong enough—it was self-explanatory that additional acrobatic movements would make that burden heavier. However, failing to evade an attack would mean instant death. Rio maintained his speed while weaving between the beams, approaching the main body of the beast.

The distance to the divine beast was under a hundred meters. Only three or four seconds had passed since Rio began his approach. The closer he got to the beast's mouth, the closer the beams of light merged together to form one thick laser.

It swallowed Rio up...or so it seemed. In the next instant, he used a wind spirit art to force his trajectory off by a 90-degree angle.

"Ngh..." The greatest forces of the battle yet were put on Rio's body. But thanks to that, he was able to evade the attack.

He had moved to a position suited for cutting off the beast's head. All that was left was to close in faster than the beast could react.

"Haaah!"

A glowing slash that was several tens of meters long fired towards the beast's neck. A considerable amount of magic essence was required to chop off the neck of such a large enemy. Thus, the attack contained all the essence he had built up until now in a single burst.

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How about that?!

He turned his attention to the divine beast to watch the result, landing on the ground nearby. At the same time, he kept his guard up against Saint Erica behind the beast.

Immediately after, the beast lost strength in all of its legs and collapsed. One beat later, the three tails floating in the air dropped to the ground. They landed with a tremendously heavy impact.

Did I defeat it...?

Rio verified that the magic essence the divine beast spread around the surroundings had vanished all at once.

"..."

The recoil from pushing himself to fly around everywhere threw Rio off-balance, messing up his attempt to attack the saint while landing.

However, he soon felt a presence closing in from his side and readjusted his sword. The one approaching him was Erica, the saint.

"Guh..." Rio grimaced faintly as he caught Erica's staff with his sword.

"Bravo... You've caught my interest. I came over because I wanted to talk," Erica said, watching Rio with an evaluating look. Her expression was dead serious.

"These weren't the actions of someone who wants to talk..." Rio muttered bitterly.

"No, I truly do wish to talk. Honestly speaking, that beast was very special to me."

"I'd sure hope so. There better not be any more of those things."

"I could return those words right back at you. If there are more monsters like you out there, my plans will be ruined. That's what I wanted to check."

"Your plans...?"

"Would you like to know? If so, how about an exchange of information?"

"What are you asking for in exchange?"

"There's only one thing I wish to know. I wondered if you were a hero, but—well, that doesn't matter anymore. Are there more people like you in the major nations? People who can fight with that beast by themselves."

"...I have no intention of answering you without hearing what you have to offer in exchange."

"You can ask anything you want, be it about my plans, or that beast. But I'll only exchange one piece of information. I'll answer concrete questions

with concrete answers, but an abstract question may get an abstract answer. So please watch how you word your question."

"How can I be sure you're telling the truth?"

"You can't. But I can promise I will not lie. And I'd like you to make the same promise. I need to know the truth, after all." Erica had a very serious expression.

"...Fine. I'll do it." Rio had many things he wanted to ask as well. Narrowing them down to one question was rather difficult, but if he had to choose...

"Since I was the one who proposed the exchange, I'll allow you to ask first as a show of goodwill. Please, go ahead."

"Then... Who is it that you want revenge on?"

"Heh... Hehe. Hehehe. What a wonderful question. Fine, I shall tell you the answer just this once," Erica said as preface. "I don't have a specific target. It's the entire world. This world was created by foolish humans. If it weren't for this world, he wouldn't have died. That's why I will have revenge on the whole thing. I wish to see this world destroyed—that is my goal." She'd begun her speech expressionless, but her face gradually filled with hatred as she spoke.

"Revenge on the world?"

"I won't answer anything else. Please answer my question next. Are there more people like you with the strength to fight that beast lying there solo?" Erica asked, staring at Rio.

"Saint Erica!"

Just then, the ten soldiers following Erica appeared from within the city. Natalia, who was running in the lead, spotted Rio and Erica pointing their weapons at each other. They immediately moved to provide backup by surrounding Rio.

"Oh my, everyone's finally caught up. Well done. Good timing." Erica spoke happily, praising them for their reliability.

"The situation has changed. I assume the information exchange ends here?"

"Of course not. You still haven't answered my question. I'll lose my trust in human nature if you don't hold up your half of the deal."

In other words, the answer to how many people there were like Rio in the bigger nations, that could fight a divine beast alone. Erica stared at him for a

reply.

“I don’t know everything about every kingdom out there, but I’ve fought with the ‘strongest swordsman’ of a neighboring kingdom before. I believe he would have struggled against the beast.” Without dropping his guard against the soldiers surrounding him, Rio faced Erica with his greatest caution. He gave an answer of similar depth to hers.

“I see. That’s a relief to hear. We can end the information exchange here, then. It seems like you’re the only one left behind—I’m sure your friends have taken Liselotte away by now. That’s a bit of a problem...” Erica let out a troubled sigh.

“I could say the same. You’ve declared war on Galarc while possessing such a power. I can’t let you walk free.”

“So you’re saying you want to kill me.”

“I’d prefer not to, but if you leave me with no other choice...”

It’d be his last resort. If not, Rio and those important to him would be killed instead.

He knew nothing about the beast, so he couldn’t write off the possibility of the saint creating another one. He absolutely had to prevent the saint from invading Galarc with that beast in tow.

“Hehehe. It seems you think rather highly of me. However, I think the same of you. Now that you’ve learned of my secret, I can’t allow you to return with that information. It’d be troublesome if it caused those major nations to have a sense of wariness. But I support there’s no stopping the leak of information with Liselotte gone. I would have liked to kill you at the very least, but that won’t be an easy task without the divine beast...”

Erica sighed as though she was truly troubled, then looked around at the soldiers surrounding Rio.

“Well, I’m sure it’ll work out,” she said, beaming brightly.

“What...?” Rio looked at her in suspicion.

“Rah!” One of the tails of the divine beast that was still within his field of view suddenly gained a glint in its eye. It then spewed a beam of pure destructive energy at Rio, the saint, and the soldiers.

“Huh?!”

In order to prioritize activation speed, the beam was both weaker and more limited in attack range—and that was why it was able to hit everyone present.

“Grah...!”

Rio had put up a wall of wind the moment he detected the rise in magic essence, but he still took the destructive energy bodily. He was unable to block all the damage.

On top of that, his body was blown through the air, making him fall several meters away and roll across the ground.

It wasn’t dead...? No—more importantly, did the saint attack herself with her allies around? That couldn’t be... Is she not in control of that beast?

Questions raced through his head as he struggled to maintain his consciousness. But there was no time to think things through leisurely.

“G-Guh...” Rio got to his feet in pain, looking over at where he was just standing to see what had happened. The ground was gouged open and dirt had blown everywhere. Rio had been injured with his physically enhanced body behind a barrier of wind. He couldn’t imagine the soldiers there being unharmed.

“Hehehe.”

Just then, with her bishop’s staff in hand, Erica charged at Rio. He used the sword in his right hand to block it by reflex, but—

“Ngh...”

The blow contained tremendous power. Under normal circumstances he could have handled it, but the damage he had received weakened his essence control, making him lose the push.

She should have been hurt too... How can she move this well?!

Erica had been hit by the earlier attack as well, and her appearance was rather ragged. However, she put enough strength into her staff to send Rio flying back. Rio barely managed to leap in the opposite direction and stifle the momentum of his landing, but—

Shit... My internal organs were hit...

With a cough, blood spilled out of Rio’s mouth. He leaped back as he placed his left hand over where it hurt the most.

“Tch...”

Pain laced through him as he landed, making him pale further.

“I thought I could defeat you with that, but you survived. What a terrifying person.”

Erica closed the distance to where Rio flew. She evidently intended to finish him off while he was weakened.

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“You’re the terrifying one... Ngh. Why would you...do that to your allies...” Rio coughed, questioning her in a haggard voice. The pain running throughout his body made it difficult to refine any magic essence. The moment he let his mind slip, he would collapse. His vision was a blur—whether it was because of his fading consciousness or the blood in his eyes, he wasn’t sure. He had no magic essence to spare on healing. All he could do was maintain his physical body enhancement in order to ignore his body’s screams.

“You’re the one who killed them.”

“What...”

“Enough talk.”

“Ngh.”

Rio’s movements were clearly sluggish—probably because of the pain. He was struggling to keep up with swinging attacks that were nothing but speed. Even then, he somehow managed to gain some distance between them.

“Now, hurry up and die.” Erica aimed where Rio stood and swung her staff into the ground. A shock wave surged from the point of impact, sending dirt flying. Rio took a large leap back to avoid the area of damage.

“Gah. Urk...” Rio coughed up blood as he moved around vigorously. Erica’s attacks into the ground continued three more times.

“How stubborn.” Erica tried to close in on Rio out of impatience. However...

It’d be bad if this drags out. I have to end it here!

It was Rio’s chance for a counterattack. He sharpened his senses, readying himself to land the finishing blow the moment she approached.

“It’s over.” Erica let her physical body enhancement do the rest of the talking and swung her staff down early. Rio ended up swinging his sword belatedly. He could feel the damage to his body surpass the point of what he could ignore with a physical enhancement, but—

“Nn!”

It was Rio who predicted correctly. He used the momentum of Erica’s downward swing and pushed his sword down on the tip. The bishop’s staff slammed into the ground with tremendous force, sending dirt flying.

Foreseeing that, Rio took a huge leap forward and used his momentum to aim a knee strike at Erica’s jaw.

“Ah!”

Enough force was applied to Erica's lower jaw to blow her whole body backwards. If she hadn't had her body enhanced, the bone would have been shattered to pieces, snapping her spine at the neck.

It was a blow with enough strength to knock out even a physically enhanced body. In fact, Erica reeled from the damage too, but...

"..."

As she flew backwards, Erica swung her staff from left to right with her dominant hand. She was trying to blow away Rio, who was yet to land on the ground after getting in his strike. Rio seemed to have predicted that Erica was still conscious, as he grabbed her shoulder before she could fall backwards and pulled her closer, lifting her body. By the time he released his hand, he was back on the ground with corrected footing.

In contrast, Erica tried to thrust her staff forward with all her might when Rio released her, but she ended up leaning too far forward, staggering off-balance.

"Ngh." Rio ignored the pain in his organs and used that chance to aim a thrust at Erica's back. Guessing that she would be attacked from behind after finally showing an opening, Erica swung her staff back without looking. But Rio could easily see through such a blow.

He purposefully paused just outside of her reach, resuming his advance after the staff finished its full swing.

"Ah!"

He slipped right up to her front, using the wide opening from her swing to aim his sword, stabbing it into her heart with no hesitation. Then, he gave the blade a firm twist with all his might.

"Guh... Gahah..."

Despite having dealt the finishing blow, Rio's face looked closer to death. However, once his sword had sunk in far enough, he yanked it out and took as much distance from Erica as he could.

"Heh. Heheh..." Erica had fallen to one knee, but her mouth was twisted into an eerie smirk. The stab wound in her heart quickly dyed her clothes a bloody red. No matter how sturdy a physical body enhancement might be, there was no avoiding death once the heart was pierced through.

"Hah..." Rio was completely out of breath. He stabbed his sword into the ground and used it to support his body as he sank to one knee, just like Erica.

Immediately after, Erica collapsed face down onto the ground. "Hurk...

Guh...”

Rio watched Erica’s figure on the ground for a moment before making his approach, all while coughing up blood himself. He then kneeled beside her and flipped her over, checking her for a pulse.

There was a chance she was still alive, so he couldn’t let his guard down yet. He still had his physical body enhancement up as well.

There’s no pulse... She’s dead. The beast has disappeared too.

With that, all the tension in his nerves snapped like a thread.

Everything’s gone hazy... This is bad. I can’t breathe well either. I have to heal myself...and meet up with Aishia...

Struggling to think, Rio staggered to his feet and cast a healing spirit art with poorly controlled magic essence. Then, in order to meet up with the others, he began to walk southwards.

After progressing ten meters or so...

Ha...to... I’m...way...now.

He could hear someone’s voice.

Ai...shia?

Rio fell to his knees, staring forward in a daze. At that moment, Aishia descended before him.

“Everything’s okay now.”

She embraced him gently, wrapping him up in a healing light.

“...”

When Rio fell unconscious, Aishia picked him up and flew south.

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Far above the skies where Erica lay...

What in the world is that boy, really? He has far more strength than can be explained by a contract with a humanoid spirit. He was able to contend with an awakened hero, no matter how imperfect she may have been.

Reiss stared in the direction that Aishia had flown off to for a while, having seen everything from start to finish.

That aside, this Saint... Just what was she thinking...?

This time, he gazed at Erica lying on the ground, puzzled.

Humans are hard to understand...but whatever. With the Black Knight returning alive, it was a good thing I had Arein and the others on standby.

Reiss took a teleport crystal out of his chest pocket...

"*Transilio.*"

...and warped to the outskirts of the Galarc Kingdom.

Epilogue

A few minutes after Aishia carried Rio away, Andrei and the other reinforcements came running out of the city. They discovered a bloodied Erica lying not too far from the gate.

“A-Aaah! Saint Erica... Saint Erica...!”

“What... What should we do...?”

Everyone was devastated by her death. Everyone grieved. But among those voices—

“There’s no need to worry, everyone.”

Erica, bloodstained, suddenly stood up.

“Wha...?!”

Everyone was speechless; it was a natural reaction to seeing the person they assumed dead suddenly standing up. Her entire chest was soaked red, and there were signs of a sword having been stabbed through her clothes.

“Y-You’re alive?! B-But how? All this blood...” Andrei was bewildered by the amount of blood on Erica’s clothes.

“Didn’t you know, Andrei?”

“K-Know what...?”

“A saint can’t die just by being stabbed in the heart.”

“Wha...”

Even Andrei and the others found that hard to believe.

“I’m just joking,” Erica giggled, looking around at everyone with a loving smile. “I can’t die yet—I still have a role to fulfill. I’m glad to see you all again, but...”

Her face suddenly fell with sadness.

“I’m sorry... I was unable to protect Natalia and the others.”

She hung her head and trembled, as though stricken by her own powerlessness.

“Wh-What happened?” Andrei asked, pale as a sheet.

There was no sign of the soldiers that had chased after Erica nearby. Andrei could vaguely guess the reason why, but he waited for Erica’s words.

Sure enough...

“He—that swordsman—took Natalia and the others hostage. In order to defeat me, he...he aimed for them... Oh, it was terrible! That boy! That boy was so cruel! A coward! No—it was my fault! I...I wasn’t able to save them in time!” Erica covered her face with her hands and grieved in despair.

“Natalia and the others are dead... They were killed...” Andrei and the other reinforcements reddened in anger. After a moment of silence...

“H-How despicable!”

“Such cruelty!”

“What a coward!”

“The Galarc Kingdom is cowardly!”

“That swordsman killed Natalia!”

“Curse him!”

“Hostages?! How dare he!”

Their fury flew out in a violent explosion. Once their minds were made up, there was no stopping their anger. They couldn’t be stopped by anyone until they turned into a rampaging riot.

“...”

Erica watched them with a cold look of contempt.

Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for reading *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles 18 - Beast of the Land*. I'm sure many of you reading this afterword are already aware, but I have very important news to tell you first.

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles is getting an anime!

TMS Entertainment is the production company, and information regarding the main staff and cast has already been released. An official website and Twitter account have been created for the anime, so please look them up if you're interested.

And so, I'm finally able to break the news to everyone...! It's thanks to everyone's support of the series that *Seirei Gensouki* has been blessed with an anime adaptation, so I'm grateful to you all from the bottom of my heart.

I'd also like to use this space to thank everyone involved in the making of this anime and this series up until now, including Riv and my editor, who have been with me for five years.

There's more information to be released in the future, so please check the official site and Twitter for the anime. In celebration of volume 18's release and the anime adaptation, Melonbooks is holding their third *Seirei Gensouki* exclusive shop.

Volume 19 of the novel will be on sale in spring, so please look forward to that as well!

How did you find volume 18? The flow of the story will make it hard to have slice-of-life scenes for a while, but I wrote all the daily life I wanted in the last volume so I'll be able to charge into the serious scenes without reserve from here. The main story will make some big shifts in the future, so please continue to enjoy the novel version of *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles*.

Let's meet again in volume 19!

Yuri Kitayama
November 2020

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Bonus Short Stories

Just for a Little While

The place was the spirit folk village, in the house where everyone lived together while Rio was in the village.

One morning in the spirit folk village, in the house where everyone lived with Rio before they all returned to the Strahl region...

Rio himself woke up and left the house to do his daily training routine. “Good morning, Sayo.” He spotted Sayo swinging a wooden training sword all by herself.

“Ah! Good morning, Sir Rio.”

“Looks like you’re first today,” Rio said after checking no one else was around.

Rio’s morning training routine was originally something he started alone at a young age, but after coming to the spirit folk village, he was joined by Sara and the others. After growing older and returning to the Strahl region, Miharu and Celia joined in; now, after reuniting with Sayo and Gouki’s group, they all participated together.

Their routines were all customized for their own specialty areas: Rio and Sara with their weapons, Miharu with spirit arts, and Celia with magic essence control.

In Sayo’s case, she worked on both her weapon and spirit arts. Her training had apparently started back in her home village, but Gouki’s group had given her full-blown training on their journey to the spirit folk village. Her growth was shocking to Rio.

“Yes! I woke up early. I only just started,” Sayo replied energetically, smiling from ear to ear.

“You’re working hard. I’ll join you in swing practice.”

“Please do!”

The two of them swung their swords in silence for a while. But several minutes later...

"..." Sayo stopped swinging and started watching Rio's movements instead, captivated.

"Is something the matter...?" Noticing her fixed gaze, Rio paused his swings.

"Huh...? Oh, no! Umm...!" Sayo gasped and began to panic. "I just thought your movements were wonderful..." she admitted in embarrassment.

"I'm just swinging my sword like normal."

"No! When I watch you from the side, your sword comes to a stop so quickly. You've perfectly erased any signs of your movement. Now that Sir Gouki is teaching me the proper use of weapons, I understand how amazing you really are..." Sayo said, emphasizing Rio's skills.

"Ahaha. Thank you," Rio said bashfully.

"N-No, not at all... Umm, could I watch you swing your sword for a little longer?" Sayo blushed and looked down, her eyes peering upwards at Rio's face.

"Sure, but it really isn't that impressive." Rio nodded with embarrassment, then resumed his swinging. That being said, he wasn't the type to let himself be flustered enough to mess up his movements.

And so, for some time after that...

"..." For some time after that, Sayo sent Rio a heated gaze of captivation as he swung his sword. Her face in profile was precisely that of a young maiden in love—it was a look of pure bliss. While the moment between them continued, there was someone secretly watching over them quietly. It was Sayo's older brother, Shin. He was probably examining the mood in the air for the sake of his sister. He had his own wooden training sword in his hand, yet he didn't move from the shadows of the trees.

"If it isn't Shin. What are you doing there?" Gouki arrived to participate in the morning training and discovered him.

"Nothing much..." Shin replied awkwardly.

"Hmm..." Gouki spotted Rio swinging his sword in the distance, and Sayo standing next to him. He seemed to catch on to the situation with just that.

"Haha. I see, I see," he grinned.

"I said it's nothing," Shin snapped to hide his embarrassment, then marched off towards Rio and Sayo.

An Exchange One Morning

The day after Rio and Aria began their pursuit of Saint Erica, the two used the stone house for shelter. It was morning, and Aria had woken up early to prepare breakfast. But when she stepped out of the room she was borrowing, she was greeted with the scent of something delicious wafting from the kitchen.

“Good morning, Aria.” Rio had woken up earlier than her and prepared breakfast.

“Good morning, Sir Amakawa... You’re up rather early.” Aria blinked in surprise. She was hoping to lessen his workload by making breakfast herself, but he had done so first.

“I always get up early to practice with my sword.”

“That’s a wonderful routine.”

“You’re up early as well.”

“I always have work to do in the morning, so it’s a habit for me.”

“I see. I’m almost done preparing breakfast, so please have a seat,” Rio said, resuming his preparations with the ingredients.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to help out. In fact, I’m willing to prepare all the meals for us while we’re on this trip...”

“You’re the guest in this house, so there’s no need for you to do so.”

“You’re providing the shelter, so it’s only right for me to repay you by doing work,” Aria insisted.

Rio chuckled “Fine... In that case, let’s cook together. I’d feel bad if I just sat back and let you do all the work,” he suggested.

“I understand. I’ll be borrowing an apron, then.”

Aria entered the kitchen and put on one of the aprons hanging there. Thus, Rio and Aria made breakfast together.

Elemental ☆ Alice

In Japan, in the school that Amakawa Haruto and Ayase Miharu attended...

One afternoon in December, Haruto and Miharu were visiting the classroom where the drama club held their activities. They had been summoned there by Satsuki, a member of the student council. Satsuki and

two other members of the drama club were waiting in the room for them.

"Huh, so our drama club's participating in our preschool's Christmas party."

Rio and Miharu listened to the explanation from Satsuki.

"Yup. The preschool is attached to our affiliated university rather than us directly, but same deal. They heard we had a drama club, so they asked if we could hold a Christmas party for them."

"I see. So why were we called here...?" Haruto had a vague idea already, but asked anyway.

"The principal came to the student council with the request. The drama club only has a few members, so the student council is going to take part in the party as well."

"Does that mean we're going to appear on stage? Neither Mii-chan nor I have any experience acting..." Haruto said, exchanging a look with Miharu.

"Yeah, that's what I was hoping to ask. It's just a simple play to be held in front of young children, so you don't need to feel overly pressured..."

How about it? Satsuki looked between Haruto and Miharu apologetically.

"Oh, by the way. Professor Celia and Professor Aishia will be joining us from the teaching staff," she added.

"Huh. What kind of play will it be?"

"Hmm... I haven't read the script myself, but it's apparently a reproduction of an old script left from a few years ago. It features characters from all kinds of fairy tales that children would know. Professor Celia and Miss Aishia are in the classroom next door looking at the costumes right now, but..."

Just as Satsuki spoke, the classroom door opened and Aishia entered. "Professor... Aishia?"

"Wow..."

"Oh my, how adorable..."

Miharu and Satsuki let out sounds of awe at the sight of Aishia, who had entered wearing one of the costumes for the play.

"Is that from Alice in Wonderland?" Haruto asked.

"Yup. Does it look good?" Aishia looked at Haruto and cocked her head.

"Yes, very," Haruto nodded firmly. It really looked good on her.

"Isn't it lovely?" Celia entered the room after Aishia and joined the conversation.

“Huh? Didn’t you try on any of the costumes, Professor Celia?” Satsuki asked with a playful grin.

“No. I only went to check the condition of the costumes. I didn’t go to try them on.”

“Then why is Miss Aishia in a costume?”

“The kids in the drama club specifically requested it,” Celia explained with a wry smile.

“Ah, I see... But the outfits are a vital part of the play, aren’t they? Why don’t we go take a look as well, Miharu? Haruto?” Satsuki turned to the two of them with a curious glint in her eye.

“Let’s go take a look, Haru-kun.”

“Well... Sure. Okay.”

Miharu invited the slightly embarrassed Haruto along, and they all went to see the outfits together.

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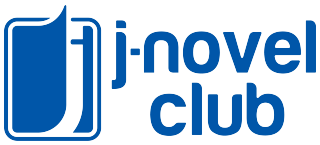

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